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Officials Downplay Concerns about Small H1N1 Outbreak in Chihuahua

by Carlos Navarro

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Two years after the outbreak of the dreaded H1N1 virus in Mexico, reports surfaced that half a dozen people in the northern state of Chihuahua had died after contracting the disease. The H1N1 deaths, reported in late March, raised some concerns that the virus—which had a devastating impact on the Mexican economy in 2009—was on its way back. The outbreak prompted federal and state authorities to take quick preventative action, but the few cases that occurred were mostly confined to Chihuahua state.

Officials at the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS) said almost 65,500 H1N1 cases were reported in Mexico in April-July 2009. A total of 71,000 cases were reported for the entire year, but only 398 deaths were reported. Most victims were elderly and people whose immune system was weak.

The biggest impact of the outbreak in 2009, however, was on the Mexican economy, which contracted by 10.3% in the April-June quarter ([SourceMex, Sept. 2, 2009](#)). One sector that suffered significantly from the H1N1 outbreak was tourism, which has been slow to recover ([SourceMex, April 14, 2010](#)). An explosion of drug-related violence in Mexico has contributed to the poor fortunes of the Mexican tourism industry, particularly in resorts like Acapulco. Adding to Acapulco's misfortune is the federal government's decision to begin to seek alternative sites to the Tianguis Turístico de México, a huge tourism fair that the Secretaría de Turismo (SECTUR) has held in the resort city for 36 years.

Federal, state officials take precautions

The recent H1N1 outbreak prompted the IMSS and the Secretaría de Salud (SSA) to take immediate precautions, such as placing hospitals on alert and ensuring that vaccine supplies were adequate. Health authorities in the states of Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Veracruz, México, Sinaloa, Sonora, Michoacán, Querétaro, Jalisco, and Durango and Mexico City also declared a state of alert. The alerts included campaigns urging the population to be aware of their health and hygiene to avoid further infections.

Despite the concerns, the majority of the infections reported were in Chihuahua, with a handful of cases occurring in states like Jalisco. There were 80 suspected cases in Chihuahua, but only 17 were confirmed to be H1N1. The outbreak prompted federal and state authorities to launch a vaccination campaign in Chihuahua.

Chihuahua Gov. César Duarte Jáquez said state health authorities believe the virus that infected at least one of the victims originated north of the border. "It has been confirmed that the woman who died in Chihuahua had just returned from a trip to the state of Texas. Also, those infected in Ciudad Juárez were all linked to trips to the United States or contact with US citizens," Duarte told reporters.

Federal health authorities, meanwhile, dismissed the possibility of a nationwide emergency on a scale similar to the one that hit Mexico two years ago. "We can rule out an outbreak similar to the one that occurred in April and May 2009," said Miguel Ángel Lezana, who heads the SSA center for prevention and control of diseases (Centro Nacional de Programas Preventivos y Control de Enfermedades). "There is no place in the country where the situation is out of control, so there is no reason for alarm.

Lezana said that authorities would continue monitoring the situation. "We will remain on alert as long as the virus is circulating," said the SSA official.

Health Secretary José Ángel Córdova Villalobos said the government had found occasional cases of H1N1 during the past two years, but there was some reason for alarm with the recent outbreak in Chihuahua. "This was a situation where the virus was affecting fairly young people, and this caught our attention," said Córdova. One victim was a 25-year-old woman, which is in contrast to some of the infections in recent months, where elderly patients with weaker immune systems died after contracting the disease.

H1N1 outbreak in 2009 had negative impact on tourism

For some observers, the H1N1 outbreak marked the beginning of the misfortunes for the tourism industry in Acapulco. The number of foreign visitors to Mexico declined sharply after the virus appeared in Mexico in March 2009, especially hitting resort cities like Acapulco and Cancún.

Ironically, there was a temporary spike in domestic visitors to Acapulco after the H1N1 outbreak. Many Mexico City residents suddenly found themselves with unscheduled time off after authorities shut down most businesses and government operations in the capital, the jurisdiction that reported the largest number of H1N1 infections ([SourceMex, May 6, 2009](#)) and ([May 13, 2009](#)).

"As wealthy residents of the capital enjoy a mini vacation, and with much of Mexico City closed, many are flocking to 'Pulco for some fun and sun....But in the eyes of the town's residents, they are potentially bringing the dreaded flu along with the sunscreen and beach towels," Latinworld.com wrote on May 4, 2009. "And they aren't happy: Police report that as many as four cars with Mexico City plates have been stoned by Acapulco residents as they entered the town."

That surge of visitors from Mexico City was short-lived, and the effects of the virus continued to keep Acapulco's bread-and-butter visitors—foreign tourists—away from the port city for months. The H1N1 factor, along with a global economic crisis and an increasingly violent feud among three drug cartels for control of Acapulco, has continued to hammer the tourism industry in the port city ([SourceMex, March 2, 2011](#)).

"It was only three years ago that Acapulco was on the list of 10 most visited cities in the world," the online news service NTRZacatecas.com said in October 2010. "Today, the city is facing business closures, an economic crisis, and a surge in insecurity."

Acapulco loses annual tourism event

Against that backdrop, it was a blow to the city when Tourism Secretary Gloria Guevara announced in late March that SECTUR was planning to alternate the host sites for the Tianguis Turístico, which had been held in Acapulco since its inception in 1975. The event features hundreds of displays set up by Mexican tourist-related businesses. "The Tianguis is a unique business arena whereby

domestic and international purchasers are afforded the opportunity to meet with over 500 Mexican tourism service providers," said the official Web site for the event.

Under Guevara's plan, several cities would be given the opportunity to submit bids, and a special committee would select the host city each year. The tourism secretary said the move would spread the benefits of tourism to more cities around the country. The move was endorsed by several national organizations with links to the tourism industry, including the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CCE), the Consejo Nacional Empresarial Turístico (CNET), the Confederación de Cámaras Nacionales de Comercio, Servicios y Turismo (CONCANACO-SERVYTUR), and the Cámara Nacional de Restaurantes y Alimentos Condimentados (CANIRAC). Several would-be host cities, such as Cancún and Mexico City, also supported the move.

As expected, there were strong protests from authorities in Acapulco and Guerrero state. The city council declared Guevara "persona non grata," while others pointed to the negative economic impact that the move could have on an already damaged city.

"Acapulco has lost its sense of tranquility, it has lost its tourists, and now it loses its Tianguis," said the Mexico City daily newspaper .

Pedro Haces Sordo, president of the Asociación de Hoteles y Empresas Turísticas de Acapulco (AHETA), estimated that moving the Tianguis could mean the loss of about 300 million pesos (US \$25.4 million) annually for the economy of Acapulco.

Guerrero officials—including federal legislators, Acapulco Mayor Manuel Añorve Baños, and Gov. Ángel Aguirre Rivero—have launched a last-ditch effort to keep the event in Acapulco permanently. Aguirre held a private meeting with Guevara in early April, but the encounter resulted in no agreements despite assurances by the governor that Guerrero state would make every effort to boost security in the port city. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on April 6, 2011, reported at 11.81 pesos per US\$1.00]

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