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Flu deaths keep rising; city restricts its eateries

BY JONATHAN CLARK
 The News

Swine Flu
 Outbreak

Federal health officials said seven more people died of suspected swine flu on Tuesday, while in Mexico City, business groups and residents began expressing frustration with increasing restrictions on public activity.

Health Secretary José Ángel Córdova told a press conference Tuesday night that the nationwide flu-related death toll rose to 159 from 152 the day before, maintaining a relatively stable death rate established over the previous 10 days.

Of the deaths, 26 have been confirmed as swine flu, Córdova said.

Overall suspected swine flu cases rose to 2,498 from the 1,995 reported early on Monday, with more than 1,300 still hospitalized.

However, Córdova declined to present specific details of the victims or suggest similarities between them, other than that the majority had come from the Mexico City metropolitan area.

"It's not following a specific trend," he said of the epidemic.

Health officials have instituted rapid testing to quickly rule out other types of flu, Córdova said, which will allow them to start anti-viral treatment sooner in confirmed swine-flu cases.



Eating establishments in Mexico City like this one in the Colonia Condesa were ordered to cease in-house service on Tuesday.

At the international level, the World Health Organization maintained its pandemic alert level at Phase 4 of 6 on Tuesday, meaning the disease spreads easily but isn't yet a pandemic. And despite the organization's assertion that any effort to contain the illness would be fruitless, two nations – Argentina

and Cuba – announced Tuesday that they were temporarily suspending flights to Mexico.

LOCAL MEASURES

In Mexico City on Tuesday, officials ordered restaurants to suspend sit-down service and told gyms, sports clubs,

swimming pools and billiard halls to shut down as well.

The city stopped short of closing its Metro subway system, but said it was stepping up inspections of taxis and buses to ensure that drivers were wearing surgical masks and rubber gloves.

"If we stay out in front, we will be able to contain the contagion in an opportune manner, reduce deaths and save those who have been infected by this new flu virus," Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard said during a morning press conference.

Last week, federal officials ordered all schools, state-run theaters and museums in Mexico City to close, and advised citizens to avoid public gatherings. The city shut down large nightclubs over the weekend, and movie theaters also closed voluntarily.

But it was the reduction in restaurant service Tuesday that led to the first sustained expressions of discontent with the containment measures.

Francisco Mijares Noriega, local head of the national restaurateurs association, told Reforma that the service reduction would serve as a "coup de grace" for an industry already hurting from the economic crisis and a new smoking ban. And the capital's Chamber of Trade, Services and Tourism complained that, even before the restaurant restrictions, flu-related shutdowns were costing local merchants at least \$57 million a day.

Juan Antonio Omaña, a 41-year-old corporate educator from the Colonia Federal, also expressed frustration with the increasing restrictions.

"You can't just shut down all human activity," he said. "Business owners and regular people have limits to what they'll accept. Eventually it will arrive at a point where they explode."

But 21-year-old Israel Rodríguez, a salesman from the Gustavo A. Madero borough, said he'd prefer a complete shutdown until officials demonstrate a better grasp of the problem.

"As long as you have to go out to work, you take the Metro because it's the fastest and cheapest way to get around," he said. "But there's a lot of people and no air circulation in the Metro. It's scary."

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