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Flu casualties down, cautious optimism up

Gov't sees virus stabilizing, locals breathe easier amid shutdown

BY JONATHAN CLARK
The News

Swine Flu
Outbreak

Officials continued to offer an improving picture of Mexico's swine flu epidemic on Saturday, taking some of the urgency away from an earlier call for citizens to stay home and businesses to close through Tuesday.

On a day that began with Health Secretary José Ángel Córdova announcing no new flu-related deaths nationwide during the previous 24 hours and Mexico City officials reporting no deaths for a second straight day, some citizens and business owners felt confident enough to ignore the nationwide shutdown.

"I was afraid a few days ago, but now I know it's under control," said Jenny Chagoya, who opened her manicure shop in the Colonia Narvarte on Saturday – in part because she needed the business, and in part, she said, "to keep from getting completely bored."

But while Córdova said the nation had entered a "stabilization phase," he also cautioned against complacency,



D.F. residents spend an afternoon in the Parque Las Américas following more favorable reports on the swine flu epidemic.

saying that "it would be hasty to say that we have passed the trickiest moments" of the outbreak.

International health officials agreed, saying the virus could still mount a comeback here.

"I think in Mexico we may be holding our breath for some time," said Dr.

Anne Schuchat of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, during a conference call with reporters.

But in the capital, the epicenter of the outbreak that has now spread to at least 18 countries around the globe, some residents appeared to be breathing a sigh of relief.

"It seems like the authorities are managing it well," said Ana Luisa Jaramillo, a 28-year-old homemaker, as she helped her 4-year-old son down a slide in the almost buzzing Parque Las Américas.

"If I didn't think so, we would have stayed at home."

As part of an effort to contain the virus, President Felipe Calderón announced last Wednesday that he was closing all government offices May 1-5, and he ordered all nonessential businesses to close as well. He also asked Mexicans to stay indoors during the period, telling them that "there is no place as safe as your own home for protecting yourself against swine flu."

But on Saturday, a small but steady stream of people strolled through the capital's Parque Delta shopping mall, despite the fact that most stores other than a Soriana supermarket and a few fast food outlets were closed. And on the surrounding streets, a handful of nonessential businesses including opticians, stationary shops and beauty salons were open, while some residents walked their dogs and chatted with neighbors – many choosing to forsake the previously ubiquitous surgical masks.

While cautioning that it's too early to declare the epidemic over, Córdova also cited evidence Saturday which suggests that Mexico's swine flu isn't highly contagious.

He said health investigators had visited 280 relatives of flu victims and found only four who had contracted the disease. Meanwhile, the number of new hospitalizations for suspected swine flu continue to decline.

Córdova said the number of confirmed cases grew to 473 from 397 on Friday. However, officials cut the suspected death toll to a maximum of 101 from more than 170 after a number of test samples came back negative. The confirmed death toll is now at 19.

Despite the improving outlook, Córdova rejected suggestions that the government had overreacted to the outbreak.

"It's preferable to take measures that are a bit more advanced and succeed in containing the problem than to not take them and later ask why we didn't," he said.

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