

# The News

## Holiday Notice

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In observation of May Day, The News will not publish its print edition on Friday, May 1. Look for us on Saturday, May 2.

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thursday april 30, 2009 • MEXICO CITY

Year 59 Number 296 24 pages \$10.00

www.thenews.com.mx

# Pandemic is 'imminent'

## Government shuts offices, asks non-essential business to close

BY JONATHAN CLARK  
The News

**Swine Flu Outbreak** As Mexican officials pointed to a stabilizing death rate here, the World Health Organization raised its pandemic alert for swine flu to Phase 5 on Wednesday, signifying that a global outbreak of the disease is "imminent."

"It really is all of humanity that is under threat during a pandemic," said WHO Director General Margaret Chan, after new reports of the disease popped up from Massachusetts to Finland and a toddler from Mexico City became the first person confirmed to have died from swine flu in the United States.

Health Secretary José Ángel Córdova responded to the raised alert by noting that it "has nothing to do with a change in the situation in Mexico."

"The measures we have taken are working and have allowed us to slow the spread of the virus," he told reporters.

Even so, he said the government was responding to the WHO's action by ordering federal government offices to close through May 5, and asking all non-essential businesses to follow suit.

Services such as public transportation, hospitals, banks and supermarkets will remain open, Córdova said.

Authorities in the United States, now the second country to report a

swine flu death, confirmed at least 93 cases in 11 states. But Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said the outbreak did not merit closing the border with Mexico, even though the child reported dead Wednesday had recently crossed into Texas from Tamaulipas.

The toddler, who was just under 2 years old, arrived in Brownsville, Texas, on April 4 after traveling with his family by air from Mexico City to Matamoros, officials said. He developed flu symptoms a few days later and died in a Houston hospital on Monday.

Texas Health Services Commissioner Dr. David Lakey told a press conference it is "highly likely" that the child contracted the illness in Mexico.

With the hope of avoiding further spread of the disease, France called for a European Union ban on all flights to Mexico, though such an order appeared unlikely. Latin American nations Cuba, Argentina, Ecuador and Peru have already implemented full or partial restrictions on flights from here.

Meanwhile in Mexico, the Health Secretariat dispatched a fleet of 110 mobile health units to the Mexico City metropolitan area, which has registered the majority of the nation's more than 150 suspected swine flu deaths and nearly 2,500 potential infections. The units were armed with new rapid-testing equipment to allow quicker diagnosis and treatment.



Public transportation has so far been spared any mandatory closures.

**The measures we have taken are working.**

JOSÉ ÁNGEL CÓRDOVA  
Health secretary

Reforma reported that, in order to avoid abuses and shortages, health officials are also moving to place prescription-only restrictions on the over-the-counter medications Tamiflu and Relenza. Both have shown positive results against the new strain of flu.

Córdova said the Health Secretariat had confirmed 99 total cases of swine flu nationwide, of whom 91 had

recovered and eight had died. Officials say new, more precise methods of testing have led them to downgrade previous confirmation figures.

In Mexico City, Mayor Marcelo Ebrard defended his earlier decision to restrict city restaurants to take-out service, while noting that flu-related deaths in the capital appeared to be stabilizing.

The move to prohibit sit-down service at local eateries, announced Tuesday, drew criticism from restaurant and tourism groups, who said they were already losing \$57 million a day from shutdowns of museums, theaters, cinemas and sporting events. Restaurant owners protested Wednesday at the Ángel de la Independencia monument, waving banners with slogans like, "The government is a mutant,

vaccinate the government," local media reported.

But Ebrard stood his ground, stating at a press conference that "If we don't take these measures, if we delay them, what could happen is that [the epidemic] is prolonged and it takes much longer to control the virus."

"If that happens," he said, "the economic and social damage ... would be much more grave."

The mayor noted only one new death overnight in the city, as compared to three the night before, suggesting that flu-related deaths are stabilizing in the capital. Córdova made a similar assessment of the death rate the night before, when he called the national toll "more or less stable."

If the death toll tapers off, Ebrard said, he will consider easing the city-wide shutdown, which was expanded late Tuesday to include the capital's popular sidewalk food stands. He said he had no plans to close the Metro subway system, but all paperwork has been suspended at borough offices through May 5 so that residents will not be exposed to the virus while negotiating the city's infamous bureaucracy.

Sergio Escamilla, a 78-year-old engineer from the Del Valle neighborhood, said he approved of the authorities' restrictions on public activity.

"Otherwise [the disease] could get out of control," he said.

But he also believes that officials should provide the public with more in-depth information on the outbreak, so as to reduce anxiety and rumors.

"You know what some people are saying? That it came from outer space," Escamilla said. "The level of panic right now is absurd."

**MORE INSIDE:** IN MEXICO, MORE QUESTIONS AND FRUSTRATION. IN WORLD, MORE REPORTED CASES OF SWINE FLU

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