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City takes its first steps toward post-flu recovery

But officials warn
of complacency,
say deadly virus is
not finished yet

BY JONATHAN CLARK
The News

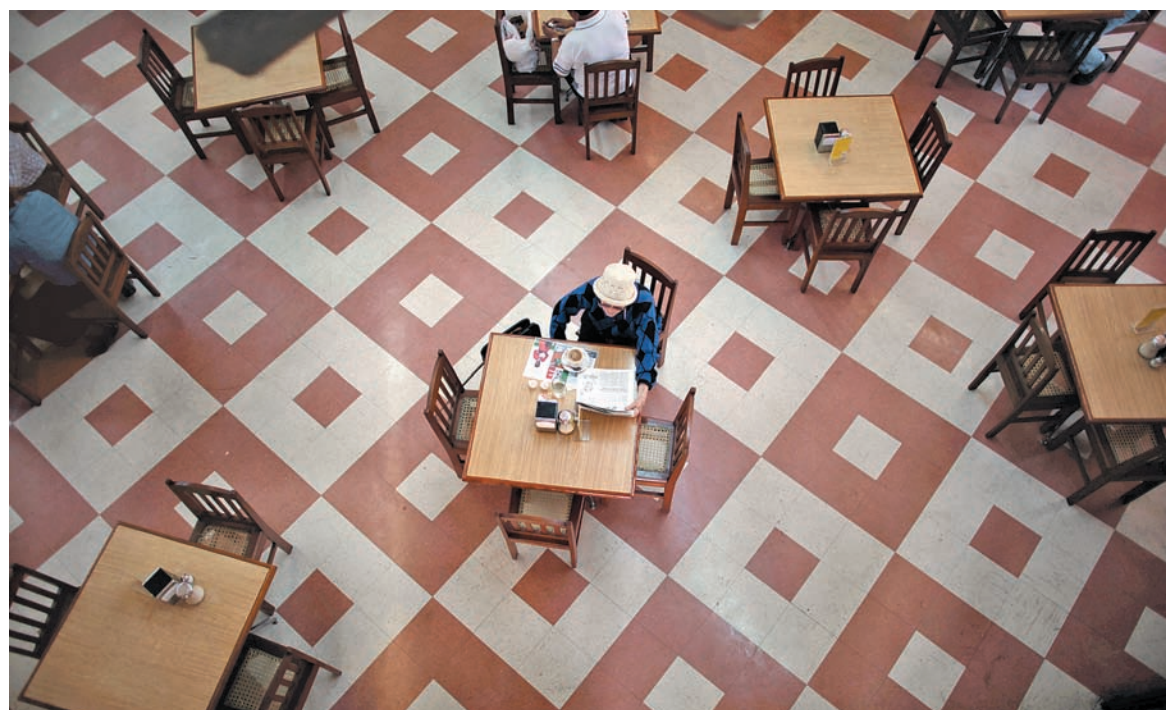
Swine Flu
Outbreak

Businesses reopened, sidewalk taco stands fired up their grills, and restaurants put out table settings for the first time in over a week on Wednesday as Mexico City began cautiously emerging from a shutdown meant to contain the spread of the deadly swine flu virus.

City classrooms also received a thorough scrub-down as high schools and universities prepared to return to class on Thursday following a closure that began April 24. Middle and elementary schools broke out the Clorox in preparation for a Monday return.

"It's nice to see some activity again," said Edgardo Vélez, a 39-year-old salesman who sat in the capital's Plaza Río de Janeiro Wednesday morning, his face free of the previously ubiquitous blue surgical mask. "It's not good for people to stay shut in for too long."

Despite proclaiming the epidemic to be in a state of decline and the nation ready to begin a return to normalcy, officials still expressed caution on Wednesday.



A woman has breakfast at a restaurant in Mexico City whose seating plan had been redesigned to minimize patrons' close contact.

"We've seen a trend toward a decline, but not a disappearance" of the virus, said Health Secretary José Ángel Córdova during a morning press conference at which he announced that the nation's confirmed swine flu death toll had jumped overnight from 29 to 42 and that confirmed infections had risen from 942 to 1,112 as backlogged cases began being processed.

"To speak of having control [of the epidemic] would mean having gone 15 days without a new case," he said.

Mexico City's top health official, Armando Ahued, said Wednesday that the capital had gone six consecutive days without a swine flu death, and that while eight people with suspicious symptoms had been admitted to city hospitals overnight, 16 had been released.

Córdova said a number of the new nationwide deaths reported Wednesday had actually occurred weeks ago, but added that six have come during the first week of May.

Speaking at his own press conference Wednesday, Mexico City Mayor Marcelo Ebrard urged residents to maintain a strict hygiene regimen and avoid complacency as they return to work and school.

"Now we will concentrate on seeing that daily activities are [carried out] with the proper precautions," he said.

Later in the day, D.F. officials said they would lower the city's health alert level from "elevated" to "medium" beginning Thursday, clearing the way for

the capital's cinemas, theaters, gyms, nightclubs and pool halls to reopen as well – provided they follow heightened sanitary regulations.

MIXED RESULTS AT RESTAURANTS

Following an eight-day, take-out-only limitation, restaurants in the capital were given the green light to resume sit-down service Wednesday, albeit with restrictions. Eateries were told to reduce seating capacity by 50 percent, and waitstaff were required to wear surgical masks.

At the Café de Nuestra Tierra, a popular breakfast spot along the city's tree-lined Álvaro Obregón Avenue, all five of the available tables – the restaurant usually sets out nine – were filled Wednesday morning.

It was an encouraging sign for a staff that saw sales fall so sharply during the take-out-only period that the café closed for several days.

"Of course it's not like it was before [the epidemic]," said shift manager Sandra Hernández. "But little by little, we'll get back to where we were."

However, next door at the Comisant eatery the dining room was empty.

"The people are still worried," manager Dhora Petatán said.

Robert Quevedo, a 32-year-old lawyer, was one local resident who felt misgivings. His firm still hasn't reopened, and he wishes other businesses would remain closed until the epidemic has fully run its course.

"I don't think the government is giving people enough information," he said. "They haven't stopped the virus, they just want us to think they have."

Outside the capital on Wednesday, the end of a May 1-5 shutdown of government offices and nonessential businesses also saw archaeological sites open their gates and cinemas fire up their projectors, though moviegoers were required to sit at least 2 meters apart and some were screened with infrared thermometers.

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