

UN says no plans for highest pandemic level yet

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Hotel workers wearing masks as a precaution against swine flu walk out from a sealed-off hotel where Mexican travelers are being held under quarantine in Beijing, China, Monday, May 4, 2009. China on Monday denied discriminating against Mexicans in its fight against swine flu after the Latin American country complained that more than 70 Mexican travelers have been quarantined even though some are apparently not at risk for the virus. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

(AP) -- Mexican officials lowered their flu alert level in the capital on Monday and said they will allow cafes, museums and libraries to reopen this week. World health officials weighed raising their pandemic alert to the highest level.

Mexican officials declared the epidemic to be waning, announcing that Wednesday will conclude a five-day closure of nonessential businesses

that was called to stop the spread of the new virus. Health officials need to finish inspecting schools before students can return to class.

Global health experts however said it was too early for countries to lower their guard, but there were no imminent plans to raise the pandemic alert level.

In New York on Monday, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said the [World Health Organization](#) "has no plan to raise the alert level to 6 at this moment." WHO chief Margaret Chan also told the U.N. General Assembly by videolink from Geneva that "we are not there yet."

In an interview with the Spanish newspaper El Pais published Monday, Chan implied the agency might raise its alert. She played down the impact of going to level 6, saying she was concerned about causing unnecessary panic.

WHO spokesman Thomas Abraham said the comments appeared to be consistent with what the global body has said all along.

"We have consistently said a pandemic is imminent. It's only a matter of time before we move to phase 6 unless the virus suddenly becomes weaker and dies off," he said.

According to the WHO's pandemic phase definitions, being in level 5 means the agency believes a global outbreak is "imminent." Though Mexican authorities believe the outbreak may have peaked, WHO maintains it is still too early to tell if the [outbreak](#) is slowing down.

WHO also emphasized that a pandemic did not necessarily mean the disease was particularly deadly. The past two pandemics - in 1957 and 1968 - have been relatively mild. WHO said that the term [pandemic](#) refers to a disease's geographic spread - in all countries worldwide -

rather than its severity.

While Mexico began its first steps toward normalcy, the virus spread to Colombia in the first confirmed case in South America, where flu season is about to begin. More cases were confirmed in North America and Europe - including Portugal's first - with the total number sickened worldwide rising to more than a 1,000 people, according to health and government officials.

With the scope of the disease unknown, several countries have taken urgent measures against arriving Mexicans or those who have recently traveled to Mexico.

In China, 71 Mexicans have been quarantined in hospitals and hotels, Foreign Secretary Patricia Espinoza said. Arriving Mexicans were taken into isolation, said Mexico's ambassador, Jorge Guajardo. Even the Mexican consul in Guangzhou was briefly held after returning from a vacation in Cambodia.

And in Hong Kong, 350 people remained isolated Monday in a hotel after a Mexican traveler there was determined to have [swine flu](#).

Mexican President Felipe Calderon complained of the backlash against Mexicans abroad, and his government said a chartered plane left Monday morning for China and will make stops in several cities to pick up any Mexican citizen wanting to return home.

"I think it's unfair that because we have been honest and transparent with the world some countries and places are taking repressive and discriminatory measures because of ignorance and disinformation," Calderon said.

"There are always people who are seizing on this pretext to assault

Mexicans, even just verbally," he said, though he did not point to any country.

Espinoza planned to talk to Chinese officials about their policy toward Mexicans.

China's Foreign Ministry denied it was discriminating against Mexicans.

But the Mexican Embassy in Beijing sent a circular out to all its citizens saying China had imposed "measures of unjustified isolation" in response to swine flu and urging trips there to be canceled or postponed.

Espinoza also criticized Argentina, Peru and Cuba for banning flights to Mexico, and said Argentina was sending a plane to Mexico on Monday to pick up Argentines who want to leave Mexico.

Health Secretary Jose Angel Cordova said at a news conference Monday that Mexico had 727 cases of swine flu and 26 deaths from the virus.

[Health officials](#) raised the number of confirmed U.S. swine flu cases to 245 in 35 states late Sunday. The new number reflects streamlining in federal procedures and the results of tests by states, which have only recently begun confirming cases, said Dr. Anne Schuchat of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CDC's acting chief, Dr. Richard Besser, said swine flu is spreading just as easily as regular winter flu.

"The good news is when we look at this virus right now, we're not seeing some of the things in the virus that have been associated in the past with more severe flu," Besser said. "That's encouraging, but it doesn't mean we're out of the woods yet."

In Alberta, Canada, officials quarantined about 220 pigs infected by a worker who recently returned from Mexico. It was the first documented case of the H1N1 virus being passed from a human to another species. Canada stressed that pigs often get the flu and there is no danger in eating pork.

Cordova presented the most comprehensive description yet of the dead in Mexico.

He said 15 were female and seven were men. One possible explanation could be that women get poorer health care in Mexico because of its male-dominated culture, he said. Cordova also said only 4 percent were unemployed; the rest either had jobs or were housewives and students. More than 50 percent had not graduated from high school and only 11 percent had university education.

Pablo Kuri, an epidemiologist advising Cordova, told The Associated Press that tests have confirmed a swine flu death in Mexico City on April 11, two days earlier than what had been believed to be the first death.

Kuri also said there were no deaths among health care workers treating swine flu patients in Mexico, an indication that the virus may not be as contagious or virulent as initially feared.

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