

Mexico begins five-day shutdown to fight flu spread

May 1 2009, by Marc Burleigh

Mexico began a five-day shutdown Friday to try to halt the spread of swine flu as the country was approved for three billion dollars in international loans to fund its battle against the virus.

As nations worldwide stepped up safety measures following a [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) warning that a [global pandemic](#) may be imminent, Mexican officials said the rapid spread of the A(H1N1) virus could be slowing.

They said 12 people were confirmed dead and 300 people were infected with the virus, a new [flu strain](#) that combines bird, swine and [human influenza](#), but Health Minister Jose Angel Cordova was hopeful the worst might be over.

"The increase in the number of dead does not mean that more people have died in the past few hours, but that we have carried out more examinations," Cordova said.

In Washington, the Inter-American Development Bank said it would approve three billion dollars in loans for Mexico, the epicentre of the latest outbreak, which was already struggling from the global financial crisis.

Mexican authorities meanwhile cancelled the traditional gatherings of workers to celebrate May Day, as the country went into a five-day holiday they hoped would minimise public contact and slow the viral

spread down even more.

Restaurants, bars, tourist sites and other public venues remained closed in the capital and elsewhere.

"Stay at home with your family," President Felipe Calderon said in an address to the nation, which is officially on holiday until Tuesday.

All the confirmed deaths from the virus have occurred in Mexico except one, a Mexican toddler who died across the border in the United States.

US health officials said the number of infections there had hit 118, while a number of other nations -- including Britain, New Zealand and Germany -- reported new H1N1 cases.

Among the latest cases revealed in Germany was that of a nurse who had treated a patient with the disease, but had not been to Mexico. The nurse subsequently recovered, authorities said.

Poland and Austria also reported new suspected [swine flu](#) cases, including that of a 29-year-old Pole who was hospitalised in Warsaw after returning from the United States where he spent time in a jail with Mexican inmates.

Spain's total of 13 infected people also includes one person who had not recently visited Mexico, but contracted the disease from his girlfriend, who had visited the country.

Most cases outside Mexico have involved only mild symptoms of the illness that can be easily treated with existing flu medicines, and some experts have suggested that the virus may have weakened as it was carried outside the country.

The WHO said it would not as yet invoke the highest health threat level -- what it calls phase six, meaning a worldwide pandemic is under way -- but kept it at phase five, indicating a pandemic is imminent.

The WHO's acting assistant director Keiji Fukuda said the virus was behaving like a typical influenza virus, meaning there could be an increase in cases in the southern hemisphere, which is about to enter winter.

"This is something we have to be on the watch out very carefully for," Fukuda said.

Although it was initially dubbed swine flu, the WHO is now officially referring to it as Influenza A(H1N1), in part because the virus is not spread by contact with pigs but is transmitted from person to person.

The UN health body meanwhile said that it was examining its response to the outbreak in Mexico following accusations that it reacted too slowly, but defended its response.

"There are cases of influenza all the time, but once we knew that this illness was caused by a new influenza virus... we moved into operation within a matter of hours," WHO spokesman Thomas Abrahams told journalists.

Worries over human-to-human transmission left the White House apologising for comments by Vice President Joe Biden that set off fears about public transport.

"I would tell members of my family -- and I have -- I wouldn't go anywhere in confined places now," Biden said. "I would not be at this point, if they had another way of transportation, suggesting they ride the subway."

Elsewhere, however, authorities tightened travel restrictions and took other measures to keep the [virus](#) from spreading.

Singapore invoked public health orders not used since the 2003 SARS crisis, ordering anyone arriving from Mexico to be quarantined for one week, while Israel began airport health inspections for those coming from Mexico.

Argentina and Cuba have both suspended flights to Mexico, while Peru has banned flights originating there.

However the United Nations reversed advice it gave to staff saying they should postpone travel to flu-hit countries.

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