Medical Xpress

Cuba imposes Havana curfew to curb spike in virus cases

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The clocks strike 7:00 pm in Havana and the usually crowded Malecon esplanade quickly empties. For the first time since the Cuban revolution in 1959, the capital is under a night-time curfew imposed by the

authorities to keep the coronavirus at bay.

From his balcony where he tries to cool off in the humid Caribbean evening, Antonio Pupo watches his street empty as people hurry home, allowed to re-emerge only at 5:00 am.

"It's justified, one way or another we have to stop (the virus). We have to go through it to see if things can get better," said the 40-year-old postal worker.

Cuba's borders have been closed since the first coronavirus cases were detected in March, and had largely been keeping outbreaks in check up to July, with an infection rate of 0.6 per 100,000 inhabitants.

The communist-run country's strategy of preventive isolation of those who had been in contact with infected people, and sending an army of medical students door-to-door to actively seek out suspected cases, seemed to have paid off.

Cuba was been far less affected than many other countries in Latin America, with only 2,700 infections registered.

By August, however, a troubling surge of 1,400 new cases prompted the government to install a 15-day dusk-to-dawn curfew on the capital, anxious to put an end to outbreaks and get its economy—especially its tourist industry—up and running again.

The authorities have been particularly concerned because the country had begun to gradually reopen following lockdown measures and had reported zero new daily cases on July 20.

"What happened to us in April happened to us all over again in August. An intense transmission, with an average 52 cases per day," health

ministry official Jose Raul de Armas Fernandez said last week as the country prepared for curfew.

The latest figures released on Monday show Cuba with more than 4,000 infections and 95 deaths from COVID-19.

Blow to Habaneros

Havana and its 2 million citizens is the only source of infection on the island. Everywhere else in the provinces outbreaks have been contained and schools have reopened.

The picture is markedly different in the capital, where police patrol the empty streets on foot and in vehicles, ready to enforce the new restrictions as soon as night falls.

Apart from essential supply vehicles, only people who can justify an emergency are allowed to enter or leave the city.

During the day, public transport is limited and supermarkets and shops are closing earlier than usual. Wearing a mask is mandatory.

In a country where the average public servant's pay is $40 a month, fines for offenders can be as high as $125.

"I'm running to buy my bread because at 7 pm you can't be on the street," says Miriam Lima, 60, a former dancer with the city's Tropicana Cabaret.

For more than five months, as the government imposed and then gradually lifted lockdown measures, Havana has been empty of the sounds of busking musicians, and the streets have become somber.

"For us, it has been something strong. The Cuban is not used to being at home. We are people who come alive at a certain time of the night," said Lima.

"It's a stressful time. We are used to going out, laughing, hugging each other."

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