

# H1N1-Swine Flu: The Perfect Panacea for Political Dissent

The heady mixture of pestilence, war and internal instability

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2009 has been a year of endless wars and man made pestilence. And 2010, looks like more of the same.

Pandemic emergencies have been invoked in failing or failed states such as Mexico last spring, and more recently in Ukraine ("Ukraine's Fantom flu", Foreign Policy, November 25, 2009).

Both states are in current internal turmoil and are basically being kept afloat thanks to an IMF loan lifeline, or billions in cash infusions. But these economic shots in the arms from the IMF medics also seem to be accompanied by mass scare campaigns fomented from the top and fear mongering techniques. There is an odd coincidental timing between flu outbreaks and chronic political- economic pandemonium. Are the authorities attempting to cow the population into a state of submission? Or perhaps distract their citizenry from their dismal daily lives, punctuated by falling standards of living, corruption, rising crime and increasing administrative incompetence to deal with these blights? Perhaps this is just pure conjecture on my part but allow me to surmise this: the H1N1 flu outbreaks seem to be tool to tighten the government's grip over its increasingly dissenting populace. This tool seems to be an effective one.

## **H1N1: using syringes instead of truncheons and water cannons to quell unrest?**

For instance at the height of the Mexican swine flu crisis, the capital Mexico City was virtually paralyzed and shut down due to government decrees, which brought almost all economic and commercial activity to a standstill . Many public venues were closed and gathering places, (main squares, arenas etc. were ordered to be off limits and all protest marches-demonstrations were summarily cancelled). This took place amid a rising tide of narco gang drug violence and growing discontent which posed a growing challenge to the government's authority (much like the anti-communist movement led by the "outlawed" Solidarity union in Poland which led to the declaration of martial law in December of 1981 ) and an ailing economy was reeling from the fall- out of the global financial system's collapse. Temperatures were rising political, the mood of rebellions was in the air and the Mexicans' tempers were flaring.

Then, just in time, somewhat suddenly the swine phantom appeared and people's minds were preoccupied with the deadly virus. In view of the political tension, it appeared to be a brilliant coup or weapon of massive distraction; a diversionary ploy orchestrated by the

authorities to clamp down on a restless populace impatiently waiting for solutions to intractable problems. The Swine flu outbreak allowed President Calderon to reassert his authority and reclaim lost ground. After several days of invisibility in public, he then emerged on television as a Churchillian leader. He rallied the imperilled nation against this newly perceived threat: H1N1. An evil foe, straight out of H.G Wells' "War of the Worlds" or from the horror fiction of Edgar Allen Poe "The Scarlet Death" hovered menacingly over Mexico.

He cast himself as a fearless crusader; as almost a saviour of the Mexican nation. His spin advisors and consultants cast him as a valiant hero fighting a seemingly incurable and deadly enemy. And act much like many strongmen with dictatorial tendencies such as Franco, Petain as the protector of his people. Calderon in the wake of H1N1 with lightning speed using emergency powers enacted draconian new measures which gave sweeping powers to his army, police and other state agencies associated with the use of force.

### **First Mexico, then Ukraine. Is Europe or North America next?**

Health authorities in the bread and economic basket case of Ukraine are using similar tactics which recall those employed by Mexico's Calderon regime, during the swine flu scare. These wily moves seem to be deliberately designed to intimidate the population and thereby politicising their own Ukrainian version of the H1N1 health crisis. What for? Perhaps as a pretext to introduce repressive measures at a very sensitive time politically and economically, especially just ahead of the planned presidential elections next January, 2010. "The global swine flu outbreak has become something of a political football in every country where the pandemic has spread, but Ukraine's response to the virus has achieved a new level of blatant politicization. According to a campaign advisor to Yulia Tymoshenko, the Ukrainian prime minister and presidential candidate purposely inflated fears of an ongoing swine-flu epidemic to aid her presidential run" (Ibid). The H1N1 outbreak might be a crucial factor in determining who will be Ukraine's next president.

Furthermore, much like Mexico, Ukraine's GDP has suffered a sharp and dramatic contraction this year. In Kiev's case it's 15 per cent (Mexico's GDP has declined around 8 percent during and after the swine flu crisis). And like its similarly poor "emerging market" partner, in Latin America, Kiev is in the process of obtaining further IMF funding or loans on which its leadership survives and stays in power. So there's nothing like a very nasty bug like the H1N1 to go around and make everyone panic and forget all their woes and maybe even stay home and not vote at all this January. That would probably suit the Ukrainian authorities just fine.

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