

Swine Flu: State of Emergency, Mexican-Style

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Citizens of Mexico City, ©2009 Michael Werbowski

MEXICO CITY — Last Thursday was first day of what now is the “made in Mexico” great global plague due to the swine flu outbreak. Towards midnight that day, health officials gave an impromptu press conference announcing schools and universities would be closed the following day, that is Friday. Most citizens of Mexico City (Capitalinos) were already asleep by then. The next day, those who didn’t catch the late night or early morning newscasts brought their children to school, only to find notices informing parents of the school closures until May 6. On that Friday, the true dimensions and extent of the epidemic’s outbreak began to be felt in the capital.

The government decreed — or ordered rather — a ban on all public gatherings, meetings or assembles of any kind including concerts, sporting events and of course, most of all demonstrations. Even traditional family fiestas or religious ceremonies such as baptisms, weddings etc were curtailed or postponed. Most surprising of all in this fervently catholic country, Sunday Mass services were cancelled over the weekend.

In Mexico, churches and cathedrals are also places where one goes to worship and pray during troubled times as these , especially when the country is faced with a man made or natural disaster. Of course, Mexico is not unaccustomed to earthquakes (1985), volcanic eruptions (2000), massive hurricanes, drought and flooding. As for manmade calamities, there were revolutions (1910). More recently, massive economic meltdowns and regional rebellions (the Tequila-peso crisis and Chiapas crisis of 1994) and political assassinations have also shaken the nation. Today, amid the narco violence, there's a full blown pandemic panic attack being unleashed on the nation of 103 million. So, people here have plenty of reasons to pray for and about.

Scenes From a City of Fear and Faith

Some churches in the Coyacan district where I strolled after brunch on Sunday, were closed to both the faithful locals and blase tourists, who along with the standard shorts and sandals, wore a new fashion accessory , the obligatory surgical masks being worn by the city dwellers as part of the "public health emergency," which has been decreed since last week.

[View H1N1 Swine Flu in a larger map](#)



Mexico City street scene. ©2009 Michael Werbowski

At times, these face masks in assorted in light blue and green were disturbed for free in the name of "public health safety" or sold as "souvenirs" in the market square. On other occasions, it seemed as if everywhere, I went that is restaurants stores, hotels, government buildings etc (those which still remained open), almost everyone looked like a dental hygienists.

Perhaps most surrealist of all was the televised live scene football matches in the capital; they were played behind “closed doors.” The teams were out there on the field yet the spectator stands were empty and deserted as if all the footballs fans stayed at home fearing contamination.

This week, I ventured out of my self-imposed quarantine and despite dire warnings to stay put and at home, I mixed with masses at my own peril and walked about without my face gear. In the Centro Historico, many fancy shops and restaurants were shuttered. Police wearing the ubiquitous surgical masks directed traffic in the partially deserted Zocalo. The same day — Monday — the local population already edgy, experienced an earth tremor which registered about 5.6 on the Richter scale at precisely 11:47 local time.

Public and government employees were forced out of their offices during quake, in front of ministry buildings. The fear which has been sowed in the media and by incessant warnings of impending disease related doom has almost paralyzed this huge and great city with fear.



Mexico City street scene. ©2009 Michael Werbowski

The only similar situation I can recall witnessing which reminds me of today’s events, was during Poland’s martial law. Back then I was just a teen visiting relatives stuck behind the “iron curtain” but not even during martial law in communist Poland, would the authorities dare close churches, especially two weeks before Christmas. This would have infuriated the already agitated populace at that tense time in Polish history.

Back then with amid the military crackdown, although classes were cancelled churches remained open. The church in Poland was a refuge from the day-to-day hardships imposed by the regime and a sanctuary or meeting place for citizens and dissidents. It was a harbor of tranquility. That’s perhaps why many of them in Warsaw were surrounded by police vans at the time. Poland in 1981 was politically ill and the government was faced with growing

popular discontent. The regime lacked legitimacy in the eyes of Poles. The economy was in a free fall and stayed afloat thanks to IMF emergency loans.

Mexico, on the other hand, and its economy is reeling and feeling the pain from the collapse of the global free market financial system is also living on IMF credit lines or loans. The current Calderon government suffers from a democratic deficit which stems from the questionable outcome of the 2006 presidential elections. There is ever increasing social unrest due to huge income disparities and drug related crime here.

In Poland, the communist regime imposed emergency measures as a desperate act to re-impose their authority. And also to clamp down on labor unions (Solidarity) which were challenging their power (muck like the drug cartels in Mexico) and forbid expected street protests, such as those Mexican authorities anticipate might occur this week for the annual workers' May Day celebrations. Poland after the imposition of martial law was cut off from the rest of the world. It was treated like a pariah state by the "international community." In the early phase of this Mexican epidemic, as the disease spreads so does the world wide panic and Mexico is being evermore isolated from the rest of the world.

Travel advisories have been issued for foreigners not to come here. Mexican visas to other countries are being issued on a very limited basis. A nation which has adopted with great zeal all the neo liberal doctrines and ideological precepts associated with free trade is now being almost scapegoated as a carrier of contagious disease. This potential pandemic is perhaps symptomatic of the corruption and crime which 21st century capitalism has engendered here and elsewhere. In that sense, it seems Mexico has been selected to be the fall guy for the financial world's perverse greed. It has in a way, become the outcast of the post capitalist era.

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