

Message to the Nation by President Calderón on the Flu Outbreak in Mexico

Wednesday, 29 April 2009 | Speech

Mexico City

People of Mexico:

A very good evening.

In recent days, Mexico has faced one of the most serious problems of the past years: a health emergency caused by the appearance of a new virus, one that until last Thursday was absolutely unknown, not just in Mexico, but in the entire world. Because it is a new, unknown virus, this phenomenon is technically known as an epidemic – specifically, the swine flu epidemic.

Regrettably, human lives have been lost. I would like to offer my deepest condolences to the relatives of those who have died as a result of this illness.

For the moment, it is very difficult to determine when and how this new virus emerged. However, it is quite clear that in late March and early April, the United States and Mexico began to detect cases of individuals with flu-like symptoms: more specifically, with symptoms similar to those of the common flu or seasonal influenza, which are normally seen during the winter.

In reaction to this unusual situation, on 16 April Mexico issued an epidemiological alert so that medical authorities and hospitals across the country could take the necessary precautions to protect the health of our families; and, in addition, samples from infected patients were sent to the best laboratories in world, located in the United States and Canada, for a more detailed analysis.

As soon as Mexico received the results of the analyses performed in the United States and Canada, which happened last Thursday, in the afternoon of Thursday, 23 April, the Secretary of Health of the Government of Mexico

immediately informed the population that a new swine flu virus had been detected in the United States and that it was also present in our country. I immediately called an emergency meeting of the cabinet, to take the appropriate steps to protect your health and that of your family.

Fortunately, aware that an epidemic like this could occur one day, in recent years Mexico acquired more than a million doses of antiviral drugs that can cure this disease, and we are using them today on infected patients, to treat them for this illness.

For me, as the President of the Republic, as a parent, as a person, there is nothing more important than the life and health of the Mexican people. There is nothing, no factor, no other consideration, that can take precedence over the health of Mexicans.

For that same reason, we informed the people of Mexico about the situation the same day, on April 23, and, in addition, we immediately suspended classes at all schools and universities in the Federal District and the State of México – the areas where the most cases had been detected – in order to avoid contagion among our children and among our young people.

Since that day, Thursday evening, we have also been publicizing the steps we should all follow to reduce the possibility of contagion, such as washing your hands frequently; covering your mouth with a handkerchief when you cough or sneeze or, if you don't have a handkerchief, with the inside of your arm; refraining from greeting friends with a kiss or handshake; avoiding crowded areas, particularly enclosed spaces or places with little ventilation; and, if you have to, or if you have to use public transport, then doing so with a face mask on.

In connection with this, I would like to congratulate the residents of the Mexico City Metropolitan Area and, in general, all those Mexicans who have adopted this preventive measure, the use of face masks to cover their mouths, because thanks to the systematic use of those face masks, they have succeeded in reducing the possibility of contagion among the population.

We have also recommended cleaning bathroom taps, door knobs, bathrooms themselves, handrails, and telephones, particularly in public areas, with soap and water.

The logic of these preventive measures is to prevent contagion, which takes place when we come into contact with potentially infected people without taking proper precautions.

And for that same reason, my friends, I would urge you all, without exception, that during the public holidays we are about to have, over the days off from work to take place from 1 to 5 May, to remain at home with your family; because there is no safer place for avoiding swine flu virus contagion than your own homes.

We have also reported the symptoms of this illness – high temperatures, headaches, muscle pain, coughing, runny noses, etc. – so that people with those symptoms seek immediate medical attention.

Since then, all public hospitals and, I know, the private ones as well – including those belonging to the Secretariat of Health, the IMSS, the ISSSTE, the General Navy Hospital in the Federal District, health institutes, such as the Institute for Respiratory Disease and many others, state health system hospitals, clinics – all those places are open to treat all members of the public.

We are acting promptly, swiftly, hesitating not a moment in strengthening, to the extent that is possible, the preventive measures that will enable us to protect the health of the Mexican people.

We have maximized precautions following the emergence of this new virus in the world. Within all this, the good news is that the disease is curable and that we have all the medicines necessary to treat anyone who is infected with the virus. The key is for individuals with the disease to receive attention immediately, as soon as the first symptoms appear. That is the key to curing it.

To control the spread of the virus, we have taken the necessary preventive measures, as I have said, and I must acknowledge that society has responded

to them responsibly. I repeat: we have enough drugs and an exemplary body of doctors and nurses for treating all the cases that may arise.

Last Monday, Monday 27th, we expanded the suspension of classes to cover the entire country, all the nation's states, in order to tackle the swine flu virus threat in a better and more generalized fashion.

And, as announced a few moments ago by the Secretary of Health, in accordance with his authority, this measure, which is strictly preventive in nature, has been expanded to other activities. First of all, to the government: there will be no government activities other than those that are essential to our citizens, and neither will there be any private sector activities that are not essential for everyday life.

So, from 1 to 5 May, there will be no activities: they will be days off from work, with the exception, of course, of all those activities affecting the provision of goods and services that are essential to the community or for the existence of the community itself.

In other words, activities such as policing, health care, the army, filling stations, banks, supermarkets, stores, shops, pharmacies will be the exceptions, and they will continue to operate. All that will continue to function normally; hotels, restaurants that are not too crowded – in other words, those that truly have the space to cater properly for their guests, particularly if they are visitors from other regions or from abroad.

Normal activities, essential activities for society will continue to operate normally; but we are going to suspend the rest, the majority of government and private sector activities from 1 to 5 May, availing ourselves of the various public holidays that are due on the national calendar.

I would like to acknowledge the heroic work being done by health sector personnel throughout the country. My respects and my recognition go to the doctors, nurses, and administrative workers of the IMSS and the ISSSTE, and of health centers and institutes, hospitals and clinics of all the nation's states,

which will, of course, continue to work at their maximum capacity over the coming days and for as long as is necessary.

The health authorities of the state governments have also acted with shared responsibility and professionalism in tackling this situation. We must all applaud their performance and the timeliness with which they acted.

The unity of the Mexican people is essential if we are to overcome this problem and defeat this affliction.

Moreover, Mexico now has new equipment, the most modern in the world, already in operation to confirm the presence of this new virus, the swine flu virus, down to the last detail.

With this, we will be able to understand, much more exactly, how this epidemic is evolving and, above all, precisely determine how many people actually have the disease or, alternatively, how many have similar symptoms that in reality are due to other illnesses, such as regular influenza, the common cold, or other respiratory complaints that are not swine flu.

That, in turn, will help us determine whether the protective measures we have put into place, that we put into place last Thursday, are adequate, whether we should step them up or, alternatively, if possible, begin to scale some of them back.

Also today, it was reported that the World Health Organization – the global agency responsible for problems of this kind, with which we have been acting in close coordination, following to the letter all its instructions and recommendations – has raised the alert level for the entire world to what is known as phase 5.

Why?

Because this new virus has been detected in several countries. I want to stress that Mexico has already adopted, several days ago, the actions and measures prescribed by the World Health Organization for phase 5, such as canceling classes, recommending that people with flu symptoms avoid public places and,

of course, consult a doctor immediately, suspending certain activities, as well as many others steps.

We must also understand, my friends, that phase 5 does not mean that this epidemic has worsened in Mexico. Instead, it means two conditions have been met:

First, that the virus spreads from person to person, which we already knew, but also that confirmed cases of swine flu have been detected in several countries – in Mexico, in the United States, in Spain, in England, in New Zealand – and for that reason the alert was raised to phase 5.

I would also like to make a special mention of the solidarity shown by the international community toward this problem, which has repercussions for the entire world; to note, in particular, the close communication and coordination that we have maintained with the governments of the United States, of Canada, of Spain, and of other countries, as well as with the World Health Organization and other international agencies.

I would also like to emphasize the support that Mexico is receiving. For example, tomorrow we will receive a donation of medical equipment in the form of gloves, face masks, and other materials donated by the Government of China and by many other nations that have shown solidarity toward our country.

I want to be clear in stating that economic and commercial activities continue to take place practically as normal, irrespective of the days off we are to have from 1 to 5 May; that supplies are guaranteed and they will continue to flow normally over all those days; that there is enough medicine for all the cases recorded to date and for a million more, should they arise in Mexico; that the hospitals have the space needed to treat the people who might contract the virus.

I would also like to tell you that although many of the government's actions to date have been focused on containing the epidemic, on preventing it from spreading among the population, the economy is still operating and, once this emergency is behind us, we will return with renewed enthusiasm to activities for

promoting growth, based on the strategy we set ourselves at the start of this year.

In spite of the gravity of this problem, of how much concern it is to us all, the people of Mexico should feel proud of the maturity, of the responsibility with which society is responding to this situation.

From the onset, we, the people of Mexico, understood how serious the problem was. I know that for many families, the contingency measures have meant sacrifices. I am aware that this has affected their economies, I know that many of you have had to stop working or have even seen your incomes fall; but it is worth it if we can protect the health of our people and protect Mexico from this affliction.

Now is also the moment, now that we are going to be at home, with our families, to spend some time with our children, to explain to them simply and without fear about what is happening and what we are doing to resolve this problem; that the cooperation of everyone, of children, of adults, should focus on staying at home, avoiding, as far as possible, contact with crowded places, and following all the preventive measures that have already been described.

Now is also the moment to spend some time with our children, with our brothers and sisters, with our parents; to settle pending matters at home, and to develop family integration now that, because of the preventive measures for avoiding contagion from the swine flu virus, now that we will have to stay at home for the next few days.

Dear friends:

At times of difficulty, we, the people of Mexico, have always been able to come together to tackle our problems.

This difficult situation, in spite of its seriousness, has enabled us to show that Mexico has the strength of character and the capacity to overcome any challenge. That in each Mexican there is the awareness, the responsibility, and the solidarity necessary so that, together, we can defeat this disease, as we will do.

As for the federal government, I can assure you we will continue to act with decision to protect your health and that of your family, and to resolve this grave problem affecting Mexico.

But I am certain that we will overcome it and that we will prevail. And all the more so if we carry on as we have begun, with everyone cooperating to work things out.

We will continue to keep you informed with timeliness, with transparency, about how this emergency evolves, about the measures we will continue to take, about the recommendations for protecting your wellbeing.

As we have always done, we will speak to the people of Mexico with the truth and with the gravity that the situation warrants.

I am certain that if we continue to act with the responsibility and maturity that every Mexican has shown so far, our great country, Mexico, will prevail and will emerge stronger and more united than ever.

Thank you very much.