

Annan Jensen: Information comes to light about the swine flu

Contributed by Sophie Annan Jensen
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Remember "Jaws"?

In Steven Spielberg's 1975 movie, when a killer shark starts chewing up swimmers off the New England beach town of Amity, the police chief wants to close the beaches, but the tourist-hungry mayor doesn't want to scare people away before the July Fourth weekend.

Weekend news reports suggested that Mexico's first cases of potentially deadly swine flu were discovered in March, and not made public. The Wall Street Journal reports that "officials first noticed an unusual spike in flu cases in late March — somewhat late in the season, considering that March is already quite hot in Mexico. By mid-April, people were dying of the flu, including healthy adults."

Semana Santa, the pre-Easter holiday break, was April 7 thru 12. The first case in the United States — a student returning from spring break in Mexico — was reported April 13.

As of Sunday afternoon, more than 1,300 people had been diagnosed with swine flu in Mexico and 86 had died. By Sunday afternoon, 20 milder cases — but no deaths — were reported in California, New York, Texas, Ohio, and Kansas. There are also four confirmed cases in Canada, and more suspected in Europe, and New Zealand.

U.S. doctors were saying that the cases they had seen were mild, but the World Health Organization warned of a possible worldwide pandemic. Many countries do not have stockpiles of antibiotics, as we do.

Mexican President Felipe Calderón now has basically locked down Mexico City, banning large gatherings and sporting events, shutting schools and other public facilities, and having the military hand out paper masks. He has also adopted unprecedented rights for health authorities to enter homes and forcibly quarantine those diagnosed with the illness.

Their doctors report that the U.S. patients had no contact with pigs during their Mexico trips, but they may well have encountered people who raise pigs, perhaps at the irresistible but dangerous street food stalls. The disease is spread human to pig, pig to human and human to human.

Deb Bonello, who writes a blog for the Los Angeles Times, reports an eerie quiet throughout Mexico City, and this theory from a taxi driver: "Mexico's working classes pay such little attention to health scares and government-issued orders that it is only the dramatic kind of measures being taken by the Government now that spur them into action and taking precautions."

That sounds about right. In several years of ex-pat residence in Mexico during the '90s, my working-class neighbors greeted every government announcement with a cynical laugh. Right now I can almost hear some of them saying "at least it got the drug wars stories off the front pages."

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