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China Forces Dozens of Mexican Travelers Into Quarantine

By [ANDREW BROWNE](#)

BEIJING -- The A/H1N1 flu outbreak is leading to a potential diplomatic row between China and Mexico, as Chinese health authorities round up and quarantine scores of Mexicans -- only one of whom is thus far reported to be sick -- as they fly in on business and holiday trips.

Mexico's foreign minister said Mexican citizens with no signs of infection had been isolated in "unacceptable conditions" in China. Patricia Espinosa told a news conference Saturday that such measures were "discriminatory and ungrounded" and that the government is advising Mexicans to stay away from China.

She also criticized four Latin American countries -- Argentina, Peru, Ecuador and Cuba -- for suspending flights coming from Mexico against the recommendation of the World Health Organization.

More than 70 Mexicans are in isolation around China, according to Mexican officials, and that number is rising as Mexican travelers call in to their embassy to report their plight.

China has been rounding up all travelers aboard an AeroMéxico flight that arrived Thursday in Shanghai from Mexico with a 25-year-old Mexican man, who is now ill with human swine flu in Hong Kong. He is the only known Mexican sufferer in China to date. However, Mexicans on other flights say they have been singled out for harsh treatment.

Gustavo Carrillo, a 36-year-old manager of a Mexican technology company in China who lives in Beijing, was taken off his Continental Airlines plane Saturday and rushed into quarantine at a Beijing hotel. He had traveled to the U.S. from China on a business trip and hadn't visited Mexico.

Mr. Carrillo said health officials took the temperatures of other passengers after the plane landed, but didn't check his after they saw his Mexican passport. Instead, they led him down the aisle past gawking passengers. "It was embarrassing and humiliating," he said.

Mexicans who were on the flight to Shanghai with the 25-year-old flu victim complain about how China has enforced its quarantine, offering little information and only basic medical testing. Among them is a family of five, including three young children, who transited to Beijing. They were roused from their hotel room in the Chinese capital in the early hours of Saturday and whisked to an infectious diseases hospital. There, according to the father, Carlos Doormann, AeroMéxico's finance director, they were isolated in a room with bloodstained sheets and what appeared to be mucus smeared on the walls.

"I'm frustrated and sad," said Mr. Doormann, whose family has since been moved to the nearby Guo Men Hotel on the outskirts of the Chinese capital, where they are in quarantine along with five other Mexican nationals, including

Mr. Carrillo.

According to accounts from Mexicans in the hotel, Mexican travelers arriving on various flights from Mexico and the U.S. were singled out by health officials who boarded the aircraft wearing white protective suits, masks and rubber gloves. They led away Mexican passport holders. Several travelers said Chinese television camera crews surprised them at the doors of their aircraft as they emerged. They said the filming continued through the windows of an isolation ward at the Beijing Ditan infectious diseases hospital.

"We felt like we were in a zoo," said Angel Yamil Silum, a 27-year-old business student, who arrived in Beijing with his girlfriend Saturday en route to Bangkok for a holiday, and ended up at Ditan and then the Guo Men Hotel.

Chinese authorities allowed Mexico's ambassador to China, Jorge Guajardo, to enter the hotel on Sunday but refused him permission to see the quarantined Mexicans or to call up to their rooms, Mexican officials said. The embassy is shuttling soft drinks, pizzas and other Western food to the hotel along with CDs, toys for the children and other entertainment.

Hong Kong also has moved aggressively on quarantines. The Hong Kong government said no new cases of A/H1N1 flu have been found since the discovery of the 25-year-old Mexican traveler. The Hong Kong government's approach has won plaudits within the territory, where memories linger of the confusion caused by an outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in 2003. Peter Cordingley, a spokesman for the WHO's Western Pacific office in Manila, Philippines, said that although the WHO didn't have a policy specifically on the kind of quarantine used in Hong Kong, "in general we support any legal measures that reduce the risk of community transmission."

Chinese officials deny that Mexicans are being unfairly targeted. "There is no discrimination at all," said Zhang Jianshu, head of the news office at the Beijing Health Bureau. "We treat all people the same," he said, adding that there are many Chinese passengers in isolation.

A WHO spokesman said the agency has said that different countries can have different approaches based on their own risk assessment.

China's government was widely blamed for a slow and ineffective initial response to SARS in 2003 and appears eager to demonstrate to the Chinese public that it is taking the threat more seriously this time.

The Mexican guests at the Guo Men Hotel have had no contact with Chinese officials, except health workers, and have no idea how long they will have to stay. "We're held hostage here," said Mr. Doormann. Twice each day, nurses leave thermometers outside their rooms. No other medical testing is carried out.

Myrna Elisa Berlanga Morales, a 31-year-old administrative assistant from Mexico City, arrived in Beijing on the Continental flight on Saturday with two American friends. She asked why Chinese consular officials in Mexico issued her and other Mexicans visas when they were heading straight into quarantine in China. "They could have warned me," she said.

Her friends had told her that her holiday in China "would be the most unforgettable 15 days of my life." She added: "Now I believe them."

—Kersten Zhang contributed to this article.

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