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Mexican plane en route to pick up nationals in China

Mon May 4, 2009 11:23pm EDT

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Monday, 4 May 2009 08:13am EDT

(For full coverage of the flu outbreak, click [nFLU])

BEIJING, May 5 (Reuters) - An aircraft was due to land in China on Tuesday to take home dozens of Mexicans who have been under forced

quarantine, straining diplomatic relations, as a protective measure against a new flu strain.

The confined Mexicans have become players in a larger drama about how far governments should go to stifle fears that the H1N1 virus could creep through their borders.

Mexican Foreign Minister Patricia Espinosa accused China at the weekend of discrimination after Beijing ordered dozens of Mexicans into seclusion across the country, although only one, a man now in Hong Kong, was found to have the H1N1 flu.

China has denied the charge, saying isolation was the correct procedure, but both countries have agreed to send aircraft to pick up their respective nationals. [ID:nSP475284]

A Chinese aircraft has already left for Mexico to pick up Chinese left stranded there after China suspended scheduled, direct flights to the country, the Foreign Ministry said.

An Aeromexico flight will arrive in Shanghai on Tuesday and fly on to Beijing and Guangzhou, an airline official said.

None of those quarantined had shown any signs of being infected, the Chinese Health Ministry said.

The state-run Xinhua news agency said the Mexicans in Beijing were doing well inside a hotel where they have been confined, though the air conditioning has been turned off to prevent any spread of disease despite temperatures reaching 30 degrees Celsius (86 F) outside.

They were put in the best rooms and sent fruit and flowers every day, Xinhua said, citing Deng Xiaohong, deputy director of Beijing Municipal Health Bureau.

"The Mexicans said they were grateful for our work. They said they feel it was understandable to be quarantined as it was a necessary method to avoid the spread of the virus," Deng was quoted as saying.

Staff at the hotel contacted by telephone would not let Reuters talk to any of the Mexicans.

A Mexican embassy official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said it was in regular contact with its nationals. "They feel okay," the official said, declining further comment.

In Shanghai, the Mexicans -- including a honeymooning couple -- had been quarantined at a four-star hotel with a sea view, Xinhua said.

"They can contact people outside, watch television, listen to music, read books or surf the Internet," it added.

In a further diplomatic tussle, Canada said it would pursue World Trade Organization action against China if it maintains its ban on pork and hogs from the province of Alberta [nN04406901]. China's Commerce Ministry had no immediate response.

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The one Mexican in China found to have the H1N1 virus arrived in Hong Kong on Thursday after passing through Shanghai. Many of the confined Mexicans were on his flight to Shanghai.

China's vast population and patchy medical infrastructure make it vulnerable should the virus take hold. But even Mexicans residing outside their country have been held by Chinese authorities, the Mexican Embassy spokeswoman said.

(Reporting by Ben Blanchard; Additional reporting by Royston Chan in Shanghai; Editing by Nick Macfie)

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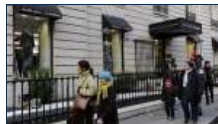
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