

# Prepared for the apocalypse: Mexico's masked metropolis

**Workers told to stay at home and government orders schools, museums, restaurants and bars to be closed**

**By Tara FitzGerald in Mexico City**

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After a weekend of hunkering down at home in a ghostly city plagued by the threat of swine flu, some Mexico City dwellers returned to work yesterday. But this normally teeming metropolis was subdued and worried, with those who were in the streets clinging avidly to portable radios or newspapers for more information on the potentially deadly virus.

The quasi-apocalyptic vision of the weekend – virtually empty streets peopled only by anonymous faces shrouded in government-issued surgical masks, football matches played to deserted stadiums, masses echoing around empty churches – was tempered by moments of normality as the economic reality of the beginning of the week kicked in and not everyone could afford to stay home.

"I'm on my way to work because I don't really have a choice," said Rosa, a cheerful 30-year-old employed as a domestic help in private homes in the Roma neighbourhood. "But about half of my clients have phoned to tell me not to come in this week."

"It's scary what is going on, especially as we don't really understand it," she said. "I have been taking a lot of care with hygiene and I'm making my kids wash their hands every hour."

And the crisis is far from over. On Sunday, the government announced the death toll for suspected and confirmed cases of

swine flu nationwide had ballooned to 149, while there were at least 1,614 suspected cases across the country.

In a leafy square in the Roma neighbourhood, fewer people than usual were walking their dogs and about half were wearing the turquoise masks that have become symbolic of this health crisis. However, others appeared to be on their way to work and some were even out jogging. Dr Raul Martinez, 51, a dentist and restaurant owner, nervously fiddled with his high-tech white mask as he spoke. "Unnecessary alarm has been created by the media and they are throwing around the word pandemic without really thinking about the consequences," he said.

"That is scaring people. We are not dying on the streets here... My restaurant business was closed by the authorities and this is creating financial problems for me. What are we supposed to live on?"

Over the last few days the government has ordered schools, museums, cinemas and other public places to close, and advised those people who could avoid it not to go to work. Many offices have encouraged their employees to work from home until the situation becomes clearer. Supermarkets reported a rise in sales over the weekend, possibly the result of stockpiling. About 70 per cent of restaurants and bars were closed over the weekend in normally bustling districts, and those that were open served only a few customers, many of whom chose to sit outside. One bar owner said he had been told the closure was indefinite.

"Restaurants will be able to open today until 6pm and can only permit up to 50 people at any one time. All staff must use face masks and if a client shows signs of flu we are obliged to send them home," said Daniel Loeza, the vice-president of the Canirac (the national chamber for restaurant and food industry) in a radio interview. "We have seen a 40 to 50 per cent fall in earnings over the last few days."

But informal taco stands and juice vendors typical of Mexico City, where street food is a way of life, were camped out on street corners plying their wares yesterday, albeit masked and with fewer customers than usual.

A newspaper vendor on a busy main avenue said business had

dropped: "It's probably fallen around 30 to 40 per cent in the last few days. There are fewer people out and about, but especially because the kids are not in school."

In addition, there is the threat to tourism – Mexico's third-largest source of foreign currency – as the millions of Americans who holiday in this country each year may choose to spend their cash elsewhere.

The Mayor of Mexico City, Marcelo Ebrard, has said that the city government will consider increasing precautionary measures in the coming days, including possibly shutting down public transport.

"I think the authorities are acting responsibly in terms of keeping us informed and taking necessary precautions," said Coral Von Rooster, 61, a real estate broker who was walking her dog in a city park. "I am trying to get on with my life as much as possible, but I am not going to crowded, public places and I am not greeting people as effusively as I normally would."