

April 28, 2009

# Mexico outbreak traced to 'manure lagoons' at pig farm

Chris Ayres in Mexico City

The first known case of swine flu emerged a fortnight earlier than previously thought in a village where residents have long complained about the smell and flies from a nearby pig farm, it emerged last night.

The Mexican Government said it initially thought that the victim, Edgar Hernandez, 4, was suffering from ordinary influenza but laboratory testing has since shown that he had contracted swine flu. The boy went on to make a full recovery, although it is thought that at least 148 others in Mexico have died from the disease, and the number is expected to rise.

News of the infected boy is expected to create controversy in Mexico because the boy lived in Veracruz state, home to thousands of farmers who claim that their land was stolen from them by the Mexican Government in 1992. The farmers, who call themselves *Los 400 Pueblos* – The 400 Towns – are famous for their naked marches through the streets of Mexico City.

The boy's hometown, La Gloria, is also close to a pig farm that raises almost 1 million animals a year. The facility, Granjas Carroll de Mexico, is partly owned by Smithfield Foods, a Virginia-based US company and the world's largest producer and processor of pork products. Residents of La Gloria have long complained about the clouds of flies that are drawn the so-called "manure lagoons" created by such mega-farms, known in the agriculture business as Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs).

It is now known that there was a widespread outbreak of a powerful respiratory disease in the La Gloria area earlier this month, with some of the town's residents falling ill in February. Health workers soon intervened, sealing off the town and spraying chemicals to kill the flies that were reportedly swarming through people's homes.

A spokeswoman for Smithfield, Keira Ullrich, said that the company had found no clinical signs or symptoms of the presence of swine influenza in its swine herd or its employees working at its joint ventures anywhere in Mexico. Meanwhile, Mexico's National Organisation of Pig Production and Producers released its own statement, saying: "We deny completely that the influenza virus affecting Mexico originated in pigs because it has been scientifically demonstrated that this is not possible."

According reports gathered on the website of James Wilson, a founding member of the Biosurveillance Indication and Warning Analysis Community (BIWAC), about 60 per cent of La Gloria's 3,000-strong population have sought medical assistance since February.

"Residents claimed that three pediatric cases, all under two years of age, died from the outbreak," wrote Mr Wilson. "However, officials stated that there was no direct link between the pediatric deaths and the outbreak; they said the three fatal cases were isolated and not related to each other."

The case of the four-year-old boy was announced yesterday by Mexico's Health Minister, Jose Angel Cordova, at a press conference that was briefly interrupted by an earthquake. "We are at the most critical moment of the epidemic. The number of cases will keep rising so we have to reinforce preventive measures," he said, adding that in addition to the 149 deaths another 2,000 had been hospitalised with "grave pneumonia", although at least half of that number had since made a full recovery.

Mr Cordova went on to say that there have been no new cases detected in La Gloria but epidemiologists want to take a closer look at pigs in Mexico as a potential source of the outbreak.

As the disease spread Greater Mexico City, usually a chaotic, traffic-snarled megatropolis of 22 million – where braised pork or *carnitas*, is prepared at taco stands on busy street corners – remained at a virtual standstill yesterday.

A majority of people are now wearing surgical masks and or plastic gloves in public. Airport terminals are deserted. Schools and government offices are closed and will remain so until at least early May – creating a childcare crisis for millions of working parents.

Many Mexicans are fearing the economic devastation caused by the health emergency as much as they are the prospect of swine flu. Adding to the misery, several countries including China have banned imports of live pigs and pork products from Mexico (and parts of the US) in spite of claims by farming trade groups that it is impossible to

catch the virus from cooked meat.



(Alexandre Meneghini/AP)  
Edgar Hernandez, 4, is said to have made a full recovery from swine flu



(AP Photo/Alexandre Meneghini)

Pigs on a farm in Mexico's Veracruz state