

World on alert as fear of flu outbreak grows

MEXICO CITY: World health authorities yesterday battled to contain a new killer swine flu blamed for dozens of deaths in Mexico amid fears it could mutate into a more deadly strain and spread around the globe.

Authorities in Mexico, where the new multi-strain swine flu was first detected, confirmed 20 people had died and warned the death toll could be as high as 81. Five people were said to have died in the past 24 hours.

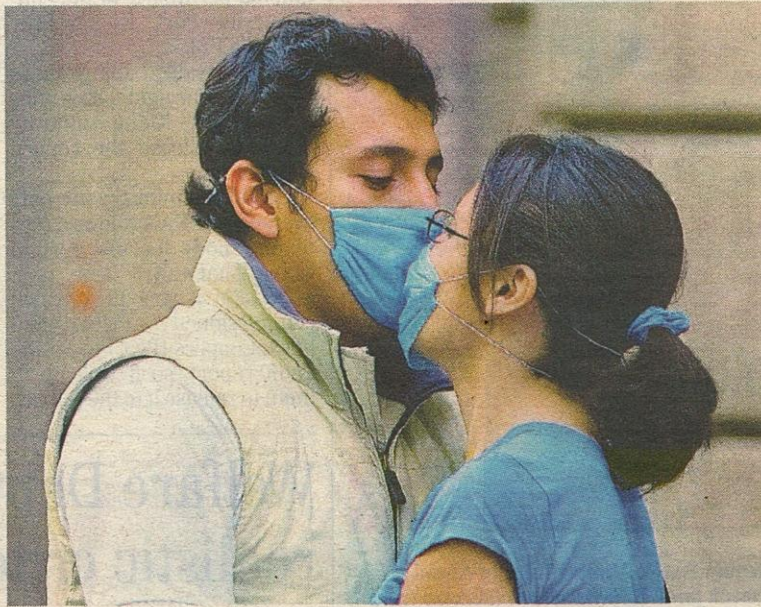
As United States health officials confirmed at least 20 people had now been infected with the flu in the country, suspected cases were being tested in Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

World Health Organisation (WHO) officials warned that the new strain, apparently born from human and avian flu viruses that infected pigs and became mixed, could further mutate.

"Yes, it's quite possible for this virus to evolve," Keiji Fukuda, acting WHO assistant director-general for health, security and the environment, told journalists in Geneva.

The WHO has already recommended that all nations "intensify surveillance for unusual outbreaks of influenza-like illness and severe pneumonia".

Thousands of people have begun wearing blue masks to



A couple in an intimate moment at the Historic Centre in Mexico City on Saturday. The streets were quiet as many city dwellers stayed at home because of the swine flu outbreak. — AFP picture

ward off infection in Mexico where 1,324 people are being treated for flu symptoms.

And Catholic church officials took the unusual step of cancelling Sunday services in this 90 per cent Catholic country, after President Felipe Calderon gave his government extraordinary powers to tackle the outbreak.

Out of the 20 confirmed cases in the US, eight were from New York and 12 other cases have been identified in California, Kansas and Texas.

The White House did not immediately respond to an AFP query on whether Obama had

been tested after he paid his first official visit to Mexico just over a week ago.

Canada reported its first confirmed cases of swine flu yesterday among a group of students who recently travelled to Mexico.

Ten New Zealand students who recently travelled to Mexico are "likely" to have contracted swine fever, Health Minister Tony Ryall said — the first suspected cases in the region of more than three billion people.

Three Spanish nationals have been placed in isolation after showing flu symptoms following a recent visit to Mex-

ico, where swine flu is suspected of killing up to 81 people, officials said yesterday.

In the first suspected swine flu case in the Middle East, a 26-year-old Israeli man has been hospitalised in Netanya on returning from Mexico, hospital officials said.

"The most worrying fact is that it appears to transmit from human to human," said WHO spokesman Thomas Abraham on Saturday.

According to the WHO, pigs have already been factors in the appearance of two previously unknown diseases that gave rise to pandemics in the last century. — Agencies