

ENTRE AMIGOS: Guanajuato quiet as pandemic plays out

by Erika L. González for the Tidings
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The COVID-19 shutdown in Guanajuato, Mexico, has emptied streets at night in the tree-lined El Jardin. Photo by Erika L. Gonzalez

As the first cases of COVID-19 arrived in Mexico at the end of February, federal, state and local governments began taking preventive measures against the coronavirus, but separately and without a coordinated, comprehensive plan of action.

Mexico's borders and airports remain open, including Bajio International that serves Guanajuato, the capital of Guanajuato State, although Mexico and the United States have agreed to restrict nonessential travel along the U.S.-Mexico border.

The first confirmed COVID-19 case in Mexico, on Feb. 28, was a patient from Italy. Guanajuato State, population 5.9 million, reported its first case March 16. The state has 46 municipalities, including the state capital, population 184,000. The capital city reported its first case March 25, and its first coronavirus death came April 7, the victim a 45-year-old diabetic man.

As of April 20, state health authorities reported the city had seven confirmed cases, with 181 confirmed cases and 10 deaths statewide. The national count had reached 8,261 confirmed cases and 696 deaths.

One of the first to take action was University of Guanajuato Rector Luis Felipe Guerrero Agripino, who canceled all international “mobility” March 13 and suspended face-to-face activities March 17 for the university’s 43,000 students, academics and administrative staff. The Guanajuato state government reacted similarly March 15 for all schools, followed by the federal government a day later. Guanajuato State has some 1.6 million students attending more than 12,000 schools.

The federal government began a voluntary “stay at home” policy March 25 that was extended last week to May 31.

The state has ordered closure of all restaurants, bars and cinemas, and prohibited large gatherings and nonessential activities. Three major malls remain closed, the Alaia in Guanajuato City, the Altacia Commercial and Plaza Mayor Center in Leon.

Organizers canceled this year’s Day of Flowers festival, scheduled for April 3, believed to be its first closure since 1679.

The city’s main economic activity, tourism, has dropped drastically, with many shops, restaurants and hotels shut down. The historic center normally is filled with hundreds of people, who at night gather at restaurants and bars entertained by mariachi bands

and guitar-strumming troubadours. Few people currently venture downtown at night, and streets are nearly empty and silent.

With few people shopping, hard-hit businesses have begun furloughing workers, including some 100,000 employed by idle automobile factories in the nearby city of Silao. A federal government order that companies continue paying workers' salaries, including those furloughed or staying home because of the pandemic, has had mixed results.

Guanajuato State government has 43 general and community hospitals and 586 health centers, including a recently opened state hospital for COVID-19 patients, with 766 ventilators and 200 intensive-care beds. In addition, there are federal hospitals and private clinics that have fewer beds and ventilators.

Staying home is not a realistic option for everyone, especially for the 40 percent of the population living in poverty and dependent on what they earn daily, often in the informal economy. It's said they are caught between "starvation at home or the coronavirus if they go out."

One of the important preventive measures, handwashing, has become a luxury beyond the reach of poor families without access to abundant, clean water.

A large section of the population has ignored the government stay-at-home order, some desperate to earn a living, others who don't realize the gravity of the situation or are simply negligent.

It has been said that China is being saved by its discipline; for Mexico, poverty will be the scourge of the disease.

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