

International

Fear of hospitals means some Mexicans 'prefer to die at home'

People choose to fight virus on their own at home

MEXICO CITY: By the time 61-year-old Mexican mechanic Martin Urdiain finally decided to go to hospital to seek treatment for the coronavirus, it was already too late. He died the next day.

When Urdiain and his wife fell ill, they chose to stay at their home in Mexico City rather than put their trust in the creaking public health system. After their symptoms worsened, they even bought two mechanical ventilators for \$3,400 instead of going to hospital.

"He was suspicious because he saw on the news about the overflowing hospitals, and poor care, but in the end he felt worse and finally went," Urdiain's brother Alfredo told AFP.

Urdiain died on June 17, while his wife recovered without hospitalization. In Mexico, it is common to hear of people choosing to fight the virus on their own at home, sometimes refusing to be taken to hospital by paramedics. The government has recognized that the health system has suffered from years of neglect, but says it is working to improve standards. When the pandemic began, Mexico had a shortage of 200,000 doctors and 300,000 nurses, prompting the health ministry to embark on a major hiring spree. It also scrambled to refurbish a thousand hospitals and buy supplies with an investment of \$1.9 billion.

'I'll never return'

Rather than set foot in hospital, Jessica Castillo endured a week at home in Hidalgo state in central Mexico where she even had suicidal thoughts, the 43-year-old pastry chef said. "I felt that the air I was breathing wasn't entering my lungs, but I said

"If I go to hospital, I'll never return." Castillo, who suffers from diabetes and hypertension, said her distrust of the public health system stems from the poor care she received before the pandemic. "I don't believe them. They've hurt me a lot physically, and emotionally.

"I haven't even been for medicine for my diabetes for about three years. I prefer to buy it elsewhere," said Castillo, who took more than a month to recover from the virus. With more than 73,000 deaths, Mexico has the world's fourth-highest Covid-19 toll, although the government says that is partly due to its large population.

The country of 128 million has officially registered nearly 700,000 coronavirus infections. There is no official number for the number of Mexicans who have died in their homes, but the government's own figure of excess mortality offers a clue.

From mid-March to August 1, there were 122,765 more deaths from all causes than usual across 24 of the country's 32 states.

"For years, we've had a sick health system without the necessary equipment," Mayra Reyes, a doctor at the Cuautitlan General Hospital just north of Mexico City, told AFP. At the start of the year, her hospital did not even have paracetamol.

'Many rumors'

Misinformation has added to this distrust about the public health system. Rumors that disinfection work was spreading the virus sparked riots in the southern state of Chiapas in May and June. A hospital, city hall, homes and vehicles were vandalized.

"There are many rumors that the hospitals end



TLAPA DE COMONFORT: File photo shows a health worker looks for people with symptoms of COVID-19 in Tlapa de Comonfort, Guerrero state, Mexico, on September 7, 2020. — AFP

up killing patients," said Eustaquio Garcia, a 27-year-old driver in Guerrero, another southern state.

Yet even some doctors admit that there is a grain of truth in that. Ivan Carreno, a general practitioner, said that from March to July people's fear "was well founded", since the hospitals "were full, the care

was poor and there was a lack of supplies." Although the situation has since improved, many people remain wary. "I've had patients who ask me if it's true that they remove the fluid from their knees — or if we traffic their organs," Carreno said. "Many people literally prefer to die at home." — AFP

NY police officer charged with spying for China

NEW YORK: US authorities have charged a New York police officer with espionage, accusing him of gathering information about the city's Tibetan community for the Chinese government.

The officer, who worked at a station in the Queens section of the city, was directed by members of the Chinese consulate in New York, according to the indictment released Monday.

Born in China, the man had been granted political asylum in the US, claiming he was tortured by Chinese authorities because of his Tibetan ethnicity.

Through his contacts with the Tibetan community, the 33-year-old man gathered information between 2018 and 2020 on the community's activities, as well as identifying potential information sources.

According to the indictment, the man — who is also an officer in the US Army Reserve — allowed members of the Chinese consulate to attend events organized by the New York Police Department.

The Chinese authorities allegedly paid him tens of thousands of dollars for his service.

The officer has been charged with four counts, including enlisting in the service of a foreign country on US soil, misrepresentation and obstructing the operation of a public service.

New York City police commissioner Dermot Shea said the officer "violated every oath he took in this country. One to the United States, another to the US Army, and a third to this Police Department".

He was brought before a judge Monday and taken into custody, a spokesperson for the Brooklyn federal prosecutor told AFP. According to the NYPD, he is currently suspended without pay.

Beijing dismissed the accusation as "completely made-up." "The so-called indictment is full of 'apparently,' 'possibly' and other assumptions, and these are completely trumped-up charges," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said at a regular press briefing Tuesday.

Despite the man's claims he was tortured in China because of his ethnicity, the investigation allegedly revealed that both of his parents were members of the Chinese Communist Party.

"If confirmed by the courts," the espionage operation "shows that the Chinese Communist Party is engaged in malign operations to suppress dissent, not only in Tibet... but any place in the world," said the International Campaign for Tibet, an advocacy group that promotes Tibetans' freedoms and rights.

Beijing says its troops "peacefully liberated" Tibet in 1951, but many exiled Tibetans accuse the central government of religious repression and eroding their culture. The Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, has lived in exile since 1959. — AFP

Pandemic splits surrogates from families

BEIJING: Cherry Lin wistfully strokes a babygrow, fretting it may be too small for a son she is yet to meet — one of hundreds of Chinese mothers estranged from babies born to commercial surrogates overseas after the coronavirus forced border closures.

China banned all forms of surrogacy — both commercial and altruistic — in 2001 due to concerns poor women were being exploited. But for \$35-75,000 couples can seek women abroad, from Laos and Russia, to Ukraine, Georgia and the US, to carry their babies.

The system has been tipped into chaos by the pandemic, which has seen borders closed, flights cancelled and visas pulled, creating a 'pile-up' of newborns waiting to be picked up by their biological Chinese parents.

It has also revived the black market for surrogacy inside China. "Baby dens" with dozens of newborns in orphanages or apartments have been found as the backlog builds, according to surrogacy agencies in Russia and Ukraine.

"I can't sleep at night thinking my baby is stuck in an orphanage," Lin, who opted for surrogacy after suffering several miscarriages, told AFP from southern city of Chengdu.

Her baby was born in St Petersburg in June, three months after Russia closed its border with China to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

"We don't know how long we have to wait," she concedes. Rising incomes, high rates of infertility and the desire for older couples — well past their reproductive age — to have a son after China scrapped its one-child rule in 2016 has fuelled the demand for foreign surrogates.

Lin, a 38-year-old lawyer, and her husband travelled to Russia last year for IVF and to sign a contract with a surrogacy company. Once the pregnancy was confirmed she shopped for baby products, and even took an infant first aid course.

But her plans unravelled as the virus swept the globe, dropping her into "a nightmare", where she receives fragments of her newborn's first weeks through photos and video clips sent by the surrogacy agency.

Losing precious time

China's foreign ministry and the Russian embassy in Beijing did not respond to AFP queries about what they were doing to help Chinese parents bring their babies home. And there are no official figures on how many Chinese babies born to surrogates are stranded abroad.

But a video posted in June by surrogacy service BioTexCom in Ukraine showing rows of babies in cribs in a hotel pointed to the scale of the crisis. Nearly half of the 46 babies belonged to Chinese clients, a BioTexCom spokesperson told AFP.

Venezuela, Cuba denounce US in UN speeches

UNITED NATIONS: Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro called Monday for the world to fight against "hegemony" and "imperialist ideas" during the UN General Assembly's virtual summit.

In a pre-recorded speech, Maduro, accused by UN investigators of crimes against humanity, denounced "the world of hegemony, the world of

imperialism" and insisted on the need to be "united" in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Venezuela supports a multipolar world, a renewed UN system, a system that knows how to enforce international law and protect the people of the world," he said, condemning US attacks on the World Health Organization, without explicitly naming the country.

"This is not the time to insult, to threaten the WHO, it is now the time to unite in its favor," he said.

"The world defeated fascism 75 years ago. The world will also win against those who seek hegemony, against imperialist ideas, and it will be able to defeat neo-fascism," said the socialist leader, whose legitimacy in office is no longer

recognized by more than 50 countries. Maduro is due today to deliver another virtual speech before the UN during the annual General Assembly, which he has not physically participated in since 2018.

Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez Parrilla also criticized the US. "On this 75th anniversary of the UN, multilateralism and international law are threatened by the largest global power.

"The irresponsible behavior of the United States is the greatest danger to international peace and security," he said.

"It seems that (the US) is at war with the planet... and its inhabitants," Rodriguez Parrilla said, condemning the "economic, commercial and financial blockade" Washington imposed on Cuba. — AFP



KIEV: This file photo taken on May 15, 2020 shows nurses caring for newborn babies at Kiev's Venice hotel, some of the more than 100 babies born to surrogate mothers stranded in Ukraine as their foreign parents cannot collect them due to border closures imposed during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. — AFP