How Effectively Is Mexico Fighting the Covid Pandemic?

Mexico recently acknowledged that far more of its people have died of Covid-19 than statistics suggest. A worker is pictured unloading Russia's Sputnik V vaccine at Mexico City's airport. // File Photo: Mexican Government.

Mexico's Health Ministry acknowledged last month in a report that the country's true number of coronavirus-related deaths may exceed 321,000, a nearly 60 percent increase from the official tally. The figure includes 120,000 "excess" deaths that were previously unaccounted for due to reasons including a lack of testing and unreported cases of Covid-19. What is the real state of the pandemic in Mexico, and what major limitations in the country's public health system has it exposed? How well has Mexico's government planned for vaccination rollout? With legislative and local elections scheduled for June, will the new statistics have political consequences?

Julio Frenk, president of the University of Miami and former secretary of health of Mexico: "The Mexican government has finally come to recognize what many experts had warned about for months and what people were enduring as part of their experience with the pandemic, namely that the official number of deaths—alarming as it was—represented a gross underestimation. Like other populist regimes, Mexico's federal government has refused to face reality and has instead downplayed the magnitude of the crisis while accusing adversaries of exaggerating it for political purposes. This bodes ill both for overcoming the pandemic and for Mexican democracy, as the attempt to generate an alternative narrative perpetuates Mexico's poor management of Covid-19—now irrefutably one of the most deficient in the world, with a death rate of 252.7 per 100,000 inhabitants. The federal government's release of the corrected pandemic figures, however, is good news. The revised data is consistent with the death toll

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Brazil Will Have ‘No National Lockdown’: President Bolsonaro

Despite a soaring number of Covid–19 cases and deaths in Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro on Wednesday said the country would have no national lockdown, the Associated Press reported. Bolsonaro's comments came a day after Brazil recorded its deadliest day yet during the pandemic, with 4,195 deaths from the disease in the previous 24 hours. "We're not going to accept this politics of stay home and shut everything down," Bolsonaro said in a speech in the city of Chapecó in Santa Catarina state. "There will be no national lockdown." Bolsonaro, who over the past year has consistently downplayed the threat of Covid-19, eschewed face masks and recently told Brazilians to "stop whining" about the disease, on Wednesday again touted malaria drug hydroxychloroquine, which no scientific studies have found effective at preventing or treating Covid-19. "There is not enough vaccine today in the world. We need to find alternatives," said Bolsonaro, the AP reported. The Covid-19 death rate in Chapecó recently fell from peak levels. Last month, the city implemented some restrictions on economic activity as hospital intensive-care units exceeded their capacity. However, Bolsonaro attributed the subsequent fall in cases there to early treatment protocols, newspaper Estadão reported. Bolsonaro’s rejection of a national lockdown bucked a call from the Brazilian Association of Collective Health, which called for "stop whining" about the disease, on Wednesday said the country would have no national lockdown. The city of São Paulo said it would start opening approximately 600 new graves per day, far beyond the city’s previous record number of burials, 426 on March 30, Reuters reported. The city is also planning a "vertical cemetery," a crypt with 26,000 drawer-like graves that, once approved, can be constructed in 90 days. Brazil has more than 13.1 million recorded cases of Covid-19 and more than 340,000 reported deaths from the disease, more recorded cases and deaths than any other country in the world, except for the United States, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Arauz Would Renegotiate IMF Deal if Elected in Ecuador

Leftist presidential candidate Andrés Arauz said he would renegotiate Ecuador’s agreement with the International Monetary Fund if elected on Sunday, when he is to face conservative banker Guillermo Lasso in the country's runoff vote, Agence France-Presse reported today. Arauz, 36, told AFP that he wants to renegotiate the $6.5 billion debt with the IMF, as well as modify anti-narcotics agreements Ecuador has with the United States. However, he added, "we're not going to declare a moratorium against the IMF." In potential renegotiations, Arauz said he would seek a slower reduction in public spending and insist on the maintenance of the U.S. dollar as Ecuador's currency "so there's greater economic activity." The anti-drug agreements he cited allow the United States to conduct operations against drug trafficking and illegal fishing in Ecuadorian territory. Arauz said that, given that the United States is the “main consumer country of drugs in the region and on the planet, we aim to adjust the cooperation conditions," AFP reported. The latest polls show Arauz and Lasso neck-and-neck ahead of Sunday’s runoff, with Lasso edging closer to reduce Arauz’s initial lead, El País reported. [Editor’s note: See related Q&A in the Feb. 9 issue of the Advisor.]

U.S. Reportedly Seeking to ‘Surge’ Assistance to Central America

The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden is seeking to “surge humanitarian assistance” to Central American countries amid an influx of migrants attempting to cross into the United States from Mexico, ABC News reported today. Vice President Kamala Harris spoke by phone Wednesday with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and U.S. Special Envoy Ricardo Zúñiga is meeting this week with top officials in Guatemala and El Salvador.

Argentina Imposes New Restrictions as Covid–19 Cases Surge

Argentina imposed tougher movement restrictions on Wednesday, including tighter limits on the leisure industry and banning nonessential workers from using public transportation as the country reached a record number of Covid-19 cases amid a second wave of infections, Reuters reported. President Alberto Fernández also announced a curfew between midnight and 6 a.m., as well as the closure of bars and restaurants at 11 p.m. Among other restrictions, casinos, bingo halls and nightclubs will be completely shuttered in some areas of the country.

Colombia Needs Tax Reform For Fiscal Sustainability: Minister

Colombia will not be fiscally sustainable in the medium term without a government-backed tax reform, Finance Minister Alberto Carrasquilla said on Wednesday, Reuters reported. The government’s plan, which it submitted to Congress, aims to raise the equivalent of 2.2 percent of GDP, or about $7.1 billion, Carrasquilla said. The country’s fiscal deficit surged to 7.8 percent of GDP last year given increases in expenditure to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.
Colombia Rejects Prodeco’s Request to Return Concessions

Colombia’s national mining agency, or ANM, announced Wednesday that it had initially rejected a request by coal miner Prodeco, a unit of mining company and commodity trader Glencore, to return two of its Colombian concessions, Reuters reported. Glencore said in February that Prodeco would give up control of its operations at the Calenturitas and La Jagua mines in the Andean nation after the ANM denied its request to keep operations there suspended. The two concessions had been placed on care and maintenance since March of last year amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Obligations that must be met before returning two of the contracts for concessions included within La Jagua, among them for environmental management, are still pending, the ANM said in a statement, making the request to return them “legally inviable,” Reuters reported.

“It’s not possible for the [agency] to approve the request for resignation because it is not up-to-date in complying with all contractual obligations at the time of submitting the resignation, as required by the mining code,” ANM President Juan Miguel Durán said in a separate statement, the wire service reported. Prodeco is the country’s third-largest thermal coal producer, América Economía reported. In an email to Reuters, Prodeco said it was “acting in full accordance with the legal and regulatory framework governing our operations and the mining sector.”

For Mexico City, published a few months ago by different groups of experts, who sounded the alarm on the underreporting of deaths from Covid-19. It is encouraging that decades of investments in independent information systems financed by Mexican taxpayers, such as those of INEGI and the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL), are bearing reliable results. Revised data indicates that these institutions are working and should be defended against any attack that seeks to compromise their autonomy and technical rigor. The Mexican people ought to demand accountability and credible information. In the final analysis, respect for truth is the best vaccine against authoritarian decline.”

Andrés Rozental, member of the Advisor board, president of Rozental & Asociados in Mexico City and senior policy advisor at Chatham House: “Mexico’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic has been disastrous from any point of view. Following initial denials of its seriousness, through a lengthy and sterile debate about the benefits of masks and social distancing, continuing with false promises of vaccine purchases and availability and ending with the admission that fatalities due to the virus were significantly underreported, Mexico has seen the consequences of chaos and changing strategies in the public health sector as Covid-19 fatalities reach alarming proportions. When President López Obrador took office, before the arrival of Covid-19, he proceeded to terminate existing public health institutions that historically had given Mexicans one of the most effective national vaccination programs in the world. He then decided to fight private-sector pharmaceutical manufacturers and distributors, which led to a critical shortage of medicines and health care. When the pandemic struck, the government belittled its gravity and proceeded to deliver confusing and contradictory messages about how to confront the disease. When cases and hospitalizations started to rise dramatically, authorities panicked and began to understate the numbers of cases and fatalities. Finally, vaccination rollout has been very slow and, in many cases, sporadic and contradictory. While López Obrador first announced that frontline medical personnel would be a priority, this has only applied...
to those working in public-sector facilities. Fewer than 10 million Mexicans have had at least a first jab of a half-dozen vaccines that are currently authorized. When the arrival of vaccines fell far short of promised deliveries, López Obrador was forced to plead with President Biden for an emergency loan of 2.5 million doses to meet urgent needs. The government has proved to be a disastrous example of what not to do in fighting a pandemic. Public opinion has confirmed this, and the results of midterm elections in June will most likely reflect dissatisfaction with the way in which the health crisis has been managed.

Rafael Pérez-Escamilla, professor of public health and director of the Office of Public Health Practice and the Global Health Concentration at Yale School of Public Health: “In Mexico, as in other countries in the region such as Brazil, the response to the pandemic has been highly politicized and erratic, to the detriment of public health. The government had several months to prepare for the pandemic but did not do so. This was reflected in the lack of testing, contact tracing and promotion of the use of face masks and social distancing. Furthermore, the government refused to provide low-income families with cash transfers to allow them to follow social-distancing measures. As a result, Mexico not only has one of the highest Covid-19 death figures, as confirmed, and the excess death toll in Latin America is falling far short of that mark. As of Easter Sunday, only 1 percent of Mexicans had been fully vaccinated. June midterms serve as another vaccination deadline. A March poll shows AMLO’s approval runs higher than </p>