

Chile closes borders as Latam grounds flights over pandemic

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A worker wears a face mask as a precautionary measure against the spread of the new coronavirus as he pulls a cart with boxes near La Moneda Presidential Palace in Santiago, on March 16, 2020

Chile announced a total closure of its borders on Monday while Latin

America's largest airline said it was reducing operations by 70 percent as the region scrambled to stem the rapidly-spreading coronavirus pandemic.

Latin America has registered more than 800 cases and seven deaths, according to an AFP count, after the Dominican Republic became the latest nation to report a fatality.

"We've decided to close all our country's terrestrial, maritime and aerial borders for the transit of foreigners," said Chile's President Sebastian Pinera.

Cargo will not be affected by the border closures.

The announcement came as Chile revealed on Monday its number of coronavirus cases had more than doubled since Sunday to 155.

Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay confirmed partial closures of their borders, while the government in Asuncion imposed a night time curfew.

"Only foreign residents, diplomats and members of international organizations can enter" from Argentina and Brazil, said Paraguay's migration director Maria de los Angeles Arriola.

Due to the spate of border closures "and the subsequent fall in demand," Latam said it was reducing operations by 70 percent, just four days after already cutting back by 30 percent.

"If these unprecedented travel restrictions increase over the coming days, we're not ruling out being forced to decrease our operations even more," said Latam's commercial vice-president Roberto Alvo.

Stocks tumble

Chile rolled out a number of coronavirus control measures as the central bank slashed interest rates by 75 points to 1.0 percent.

It didn't prevent the Santiago stock exchange closing down 14 percent, its worst fall in three decades as investors continued to panic.

Stocks throughout the region were hit hard as the Sao Paulo exchange lost almost 14 percent and Colombia was down more than 15 percent before suspending trading until Tuesday.

Brazil's real closed below five to the dollar for the first time.

Chile's closed borders caused a problem for a quarantined cruise ship in the deep south of the country.

More than 200 passengers and crew aboard the Silver Explorer in the remote port of Caleta Tortel, some 2,400 kilometers (1,500 miles) south of the capital Santiago, are in lockdown after six people tested positive for coronavirus.

They have been taken to hospital and health authorities want to evacuate the remaining passengers back to their home countries, but may need special permission.

"We've taken the decision to ask the countries whose nationals are present on this ship... to conduct an evacuation operation from the Puerto Montt airbase" more than 1,00 kilometers away, said Health Minister Jaime Manalich.

Cuba, though, said it was allowing a British cruise ship to dock despite five people on board being infected with the coronavirus and nearly 40

others in isolation with flu-like symptoms.

"We are working around the clock to arrange evacuation flights from Cuba to the UK as soon as possible for passengers on the Braemar cruise ship," a British foreign ministry spokesman said.

Ecuador, which has seen 58 cases and two deaths, banned tourists from the Galapagos Islands on Monday while authorities in Rio de Janeiro used megaphones to order people at the beach to go home.

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