



**CORONAVIRUS**

## Peru spars with U.S. over letting stranded Americans fly home during coronavirus outbreak

The South American nation wants assurances that its citizens will be given safe passage back from the U.S. before Americans are allowed to leave, sources close to the situation say.



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American citizens in Peru who are trying to head home in response to the coronavirus outbreak are being held there by a Peruvian government that first wants assurances thousands of Peruvian citizens will be able to return from the U.S., according to two sources familiar with the situation.

Peru is in the process of shutting down all international travel, but thousands of Americans are believed to remain in the country. An U.S. official familiar with the situation said the Peruvian government is not allowing them to leave until the White House ensures thousands of Peruvians are given safe passage home.

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“The government of Peru is basically holding these Americans hostage,” the U.S. official said. “They want the U.S. to fill planes with Peruvians before they’ll let the planes land to pick up Americans. But they’re not ready or organized in the United States to gather their people up, and they don’t want to pay for the flight.”

One American stuck in the South American nation said he received similar information from the office of Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.) the ton

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“[The State Department’s] planned repatriation flights have not yet been approved by the Peruvian government,” read an email from Feinstein’s office to the stranded Americans. “They are requesting reciprocal support for their own citizens to leave the United States.”

The State Department said it flew a group of Americans home on Saturday, including “medically vulnerable” citizens and some Peace Corps volunteers and embassy personnel. But a spokesperson did not comment on whether the Peruvian government is preventing the rest from leaving. U.S. diplomats estimate a few thousand Americans remain in Peru, a spokesperson did not respond to a question about the number.

Peruvian officials, meanwhile, say they are merely trying to figure out how best to get each nation’s residents home.

"We are actively engaging State Department officials to coordinate in a harmonic way the best way to carry out bringing Americans from Peru back to the U.S. and Peruvians in the U.S. back to Peru," said Rodolfo Pereira, press counselor for the Peruvian Embassy in Washington. "What we are trying to set up is the best system to conduct that operation."

Pereira dismissed questions about tensions between the two sides, saying there are constant communications, including at high levels, and that much of what is being discussed is logistics.

In a phone interview, he said he didn't know exactly how many Peruvians in the United States were trying to get back home, but estimated that it was about 6,000. He described them as a mix of students, vacationers and temporary workers. He noted that Peru's government was trying to help its citizens stranded in other countries return as well while Peru imposes a full shutdown of its borders and airports.

Asked about criticism that Peru was essentially taking Americans hostage until

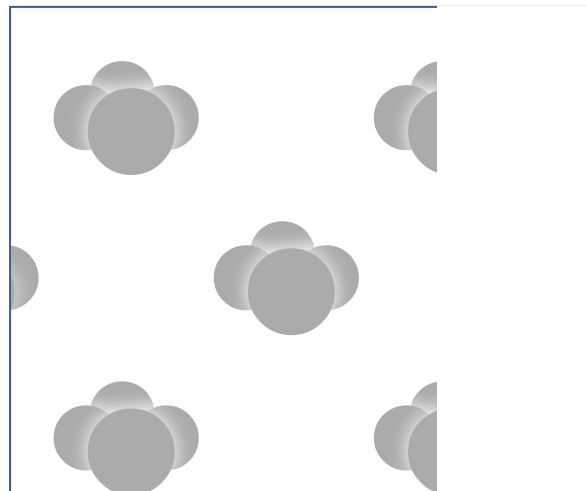
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did not immediately respond to a follow-up question about whether Peru will cover the cost of the flights.

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He also urged Americans stranded in Peru to visit [websites](#) his government has arranged if they need assistance.

Americans also remain stuck abroad in other countries, including Guatemala, which closed its borders this past week. The U.S. citizens there, having received little help from the embassy and unable to book flights home, are crossing the border with Mexico in droves to get to airports where planes are still taking off back to the U.S., several people on the ground told POLITICO.

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airports.

The U.S. government has made "individual efforts" to bring home about 3,000 Americans since the outbreak began affecting flight service, Vice President Mike Pence said at a Saturday afternoon White House press briefing on the coronavirus pandemic.

"I think there is an ongoing effort to address that with chartered commercial flights that the government is providing," Pence said. Military transport is also available, he said.

"We would just encourage any American that is looking on from overseas, contact the local U.S. Embassy," Pence said. "Let them know about your circumstances. And know that we're going to work, continue to work very diligently to get our Americans home."

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