

Hospitals and intensive care units again overflowing in Brazil

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The recent surge in confirmed cases of the coronavirus in Brazil has driven the country's health care system to the brink of collapse. Over the past four weeks, the daily number of new confirmed cases has jumped from an average of 45,000 to 70,000, making Brazil the world epicenter of the pandemic. Alongside the rise in new cases, Brazil has seen a record rise in deaths, from an average of more than 1,000 a day in mid-February to nearly 2,000 today.

According to Brazil's Fiocruz public health research institution, the current surge equates to a growth rate in the case count of 1.5 percent per day, and a growth rate in the death count of 2.6 percent per day. These values are "high compared to the first phase of the pandemic in Brazil," Fiocruz reports.

Such extreme rates of transmission and death, currently the highest in the world, have driven Brazil's health care system to the brink of collapse. As of Monday, the intensive care unit (ICU) occupancy rate is above 80 percent in every state except Roraima (73 percent) and Rio de Janeiro (79 percent). Fifteen states have a hospital occupancy rate of at least 90 percent, including Rondônia (98 percent), Santa Catarina (99 percent) and Rio Grande do Sul (100 percent).

The situation in particular in hospitals is even more dire. According to a statement given to CNN, hospital management at Porto Alegre Hospital das Clínicas, the largest public hospital in Rio Grande do Sul's capital city, noted that "The hospital's ICU Covid ward already serves at 132 percent occupancy." As a result, the hospital has been forced to close its doors to new patients.

In Rondônia, the state is facing an "imminent shortage of oxygen," according to a letter from the office of its attorney general, which warned that hospitals in the region will run out of medical oxygen

in two weeks. Oxygen is one of the primary treatments for severe cases of COVID-19, and mortality rates have been shown to sharply spike if it is unavailable.

Fiocruz gave a harrowing depiction of the situation across the country in the most recent edition of its "COVID-19 Extraordinary Bulletin," noting that "Although some governors and mayors have been carrying out efforts to open ICU beds to care for patients with Covid-19," this strategy is limited by the high growth rate of cases in every state. "In general terms," the report continues, "the high numbers denote the collapse of the health system for the care of patients requiring complex care for COVID-19, in addition to immeasurable losses in the care of patients who demand care due to other health problems."

The recent surge in cases has been largely attributed to the emerging dominance of the P.1 variant of the coronavirus, which is up to three times as transmissible as the original version of the virus. Further studies have shown that the P.1 variant is able to dodge acquired immunity, infecting up to 61 percent of those who have already been infected.

That such a dangerous variant of the coronavirus was allowed to spread, however, is directly attributable to the policies of Brazil's fascist president, Jair Bolsonaro. When the virus first emerged, he derided the deadly disease as a "little flu," and he continues to regularly make public appearances without a mask. He has also spearheaded various reopening campaigns in Brazil, including among schools, where the virus is able to spread very easily.

As a result of such reckless and homicidal "herd immunity" policies, Brazil has the second highest total cases and deaths in the world, more than 11,600,000 and 282,000 respectively, second only to the United States (over 30 million cases and at least 550,000

deaths).

Moreover, Brazil is critically short of vaccine supplies. While initial studies show that the Pfizer mRNA vaccine is effective against the P.1 variant, and is approved by the country's health regulator, the government actually turned down an offer of 70 million doses last August. So far, less than 2 percent of Brazil's population has been vaccinated.

Much of Europe is facing what could become a similar crisis. Countries in eastern Europe and the Baltic region—including Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine—have seen daily case counts skyrocket, as the B.1.1.7 variant, thought to have originated in Great Britain, races across the continent. Hungary alone has faced a seven-fold increase in daily cases, which now stand above 7,500. In Ukraine, more than 200 people are dying each day from the virus.

Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands also face increasing case counts, though not quite as severe as other regions. In Germany, case rates remain high after the most recent surge, which began in October. They currently stand at more than 10,000 new cases recorded each day. The number of daily cases in Italy has nearly doubled to more than 22,000 each day, with more than 300 new deaths.

The Czech Republic has nearly 11,000 cases each day and more than 200 deaths, giving it the inauspicious ranking of most deaths per capita in countries with a population of more than 10 million, second only to Gibraltar and San Marino when all countries are considered.

Similar to Brazil and much of the world, the current surges are the result of reckless and poorly planned business and school reopening drives, which took on renewed vigor at the start of the fall academic year. An example is the Czech Republic, where the death rate averaged in the single digits until last September, when cases and deaths rose in the wake of school reopenings, with surges that were blunted in only a limited fashion by sporadic closings.

Sweden, where the policy of herd immunity was pioneered, faced a similar situation from October to January, when death rates rose from about five per day to more than 90, before coming down to what they were late last summer. Case numbers still remain high,

however, and are climbing, an indication that further death is still to come.

A similar situation is likely brewing in the United States. While case counts across the country are generally trending downward, the declines in a number of states, including Illinois and Pennsylvania, have leveled off, while in Michigan and New Jersey, they have begun to rise. It is estimated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that the leveling off or increase in cases is caused by the B.1.1.7 variant, which has grown to 30 percent of all new confirmed cases. There is a danger that if the variant becomes wholly dominant, the more transmissible and deadly mutation of the coronavirus will spark even greater surges of the pandemic in the US.

The continued spread of the coronavirus and its many new and more dangerous variants shows the folly of relying solely on vaccines to resolve the pandemic. World Health Organization Director General Dr. Tedros made this point forcefully in his remarks last Friday, when he warned, "The longer the virus circulates, the higher the chances that variants will emerge that make vaccines less effective. But variants don't make physical distancing less effective. They don't make hand hygiene, masks, ventilation and other public health measures less effective."

Above all, public health measures must include the closure of nonessential businesses and in-person schooling, with workers subsidized by reclaiming the trillions funneled to the world's corporate and financial elite. Data the world over has shown, throughout the pandemic, that lockdowns are the most effective and efficient way of suppressing the pandemic, which has so far taken more than 2,690,000 human lives. Such measures must be combined with an international, revolutionary socialist program to end not just the pandemic, but the economic and political system that is responsible for the incompetent and inhumane response by governments to its emergence—the capitalist system.



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