

Copa América football tournament to be held in Brazil amid COVID-19 surge

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On June 13, the Copa América football tournament is to begin in Brazil under conditions of an already surging third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. With roughly 2,500 people dying daily, this may prove the deadliest stage yet.

For the government of Brazil's fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro, hosting the championship is a means of reaffirming to both national and global ruling elites that no number of deaths will deter his pro-corporate "herd immunity" policy based on the complete reopening of all economic activity.

With Brazil's official death toll set to top 500,000 in the course of the games, Bolsonaro told the media, "From the beginning I have said about the pandemic: I regret the deaths, but we have to live."

The two countries that had originally been selected to host the football tournament between 10 South American teams bowed out in May: Colombia in the face of mass protests; and Argentina in response to an uncontrolled upsurge in COVID-19 infections. Bolsonaro volunteered to fill the breach, with the approval of all participating countries.

The June 1 announcement that Brazil would host the games came just days after protests against the Bolsonaro government's handling of the pandemic brought tens of thousands of students and youth into the streets of major capitals throughout the country, and amid a Senate commission of inquiry into the federal and state governments' response to COVID-19. The decision initially provoked worried reactions by prominent sections of the establishment that, coming amid persistently high levels of infections and reports of ICUs overflowing with patients, it could spark a new upsurge of opposition to the government.

Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) São Paulo state Governor João Doria first responded positively to Bolsonaro's announcement, only to reverse himself a few

hours later. The event had initially included matches in the Amazonas capital of Manaus, which has twice become a world epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic. The city was removed from the tournament's calendar a day after Bolsonaro's press conference.

Disquiet within sections of the ruling class found expression in the extraordinary political crisis that swiftly gripped the corrupt Brazilian Confederation of Football (CBF). Last week, after reports that the Brazilian national football team was planning to make a statement opposing the Copa América over the pandemic, and even considering a boycott of the tournament, the CBF's ethics council took up an internal sexual abuse accusation against the confederation's president, Rogério Caboclo, forcing him to take a 30-day suspension. The move was taken less than 48 hours after the accusation was made, with major corporations and banks, including the biggest Brazilian bank, Itaú, and the major sports equipment manufacturer, Nike, making public statements demanding action.

While these sections of the ruling class sought to frame the entire affair around the sexual abuse charges, Senator Flávio Bolsonaro, the president's eldest son, called attention to the wider political issues surrounding Caboclo's swift removal. Responding to the reports of a possible boycott by the national team, he posted a video accusing its coach, known as Tite, of manipulating the players, implying that he was deliberately creating a crisis to benefit the Workers Party (PT). Bolsonaro's far-right political base quickly responded with an online campaign around the hashtag #CommunistTiteOut.

The maneuver to remove Caboclo from the picture signaled the CBF's distancing itself from the Bolsonaro government, of which Caboclo is a close ally, with the hope of convincing the players to accept the games in Brazil, as part of the efforts by all the governments in the region to bring their own national teams there.

The Brazilian daily *Folha de São Paulo* spelled out weeks before April's unprecedented death toll. Meanwhile, the daily death toll has topped 2,500 for the last four consecutive days.

motivation behind the swift action on the sexual abuse charge: "Since last week, athletes have been trying to define what to say about the general discontent towards holding the Copa América in the country and the relationship with CBF president, Rogério Caboclo. His exclusion on Sunday made everything easier."

The ongoing conflicts over the tournament were exposed by a number of major transnational companies removing their brands from promotional spaces in the matches, with the beverage giant AB InBev now following an initial move by Mastercard.

However, for the ruling class as a whole, the financial interests at stake in the tournament go far beyond recovering the US\$30 million in investments already made or dealing with the millions in potential losses from the boycott by certain brands.

The drive by the political establishment to allow the event to go forward is meant to signal that Brazil, and South America as a whole, is a safe place for foreign investments, to be secured through the uninterrupted exploitation of the working class in the face of mass death. In a televised speech a day after the announcement of the coming of Copa América to Brazil, Bolsonaro celebrated: "Yesterday, the stock exchange reached a historical record, the Brazilian currency is strengthened, and we are advancing in the difficult process of privatizations."

On Thursday, just days before the first matches, Bolsonaro said that his health minister would issue a ruling allowing people who are vaccinated and those who were already infected not to wear masks. He said that his minister would make such an authorization "to take off this symbol, that obviously has use for those who are infected."

This bid to remove any "symbol" of seeking to mitigate the spread of infections is being carried out in defiance of warnings that the Copa América has massive implications for the pandemic in Brazil, with leading medical scientist Miguel Nicolelis saying that the games could be the "last straw" for a looming third coronavirus wave.

As of Tuesday, ten states and the federal district registered more than 90 percent occupation of ICU beds, while the number of cases has plateaued at the stratospheric levels reached in April. The death toll is climbing back to the level reached that month, when more than 3,000 daily deaths were registered for weeks, reaching a peak of 4,249 in a single day. On June 2, there were 95,601 new cases, a level that was only reached a

In interviews with *BBC Brasil*, Brazilian health experts expressed outrage over the decision to hold the tournament in the country. Professor Antônio Augusto Moura da Silva, a professor in the Department of Public Health at the Federal University of Maranhão, warned about the danger of allowing an event involving high local and international flows of people during the pandemic: "We are confronting a second wave that hasn't ceased yet. The transmission rate is also very high, and we are in an out-of-control situation. Moreover, the immunization rate is very low, with only 10.4 percent of the population vaccinated with the second shot against COVID-19."

Professor Moura da Silva added: "Before, the population was shocked by 500 deaths a day. Then, by 4,000. Today, it is not shocked by 2,000 people dying, and events like this are more easily accepted. But it is a decision that is not based upon health. If it had been, it would be not to accept, as Argentina and Colombia did. This was a political and economic decision." He added, "But for our politicians, the deaths of people don't matter."

Epidemiologist and professor in the Department of Public Health at the Federal University of Santa Catarina Lucio Botelho agreed, stating: "This is insanity. And it is irresponsible on all levels. Perhaps my analysis has to be political. Once again it is something that will go down in the history of bread and circuses. It makes no sense that two countries refused the event and Brazil calls for it to come here. The vaccine is not going forward, and we are bringing many risks to the country."

Bolsonaro's hosting of the Copa América is only the most grotesque expression of a universal process that subordinates the protection of human life to private profit and the further enrichment of financial oligarchies across the planet.



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