

Bolsonaro's "herd immunity" led to Manaus health care collapse, mass infection of indigenous populations, says Brazilian scientist Lucas Ferrante

Part two

Our reporters
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In the second part of the interview with Lucas Ferrante, the researcher at the National Institute of Amazonian Research (INPA) talks about the criminal negligence of the government of the fascist Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and his local allies in the implementation of the herd immunity policy in Manaus and the criminal policy toward the indigenous population in Brazil during the pandemic.

Read the first part here.

Manaus: Negligence that resulted in a "pandemic crime with deadly results"

All the warnings that Lucas Ferrante and his collaborators published in the world's most prestigious scientific journals in the first months of the pandemic were ignored by the governor of Amazonas, Wilson Lima, a local ally of Bolsonaro. Twice, in April 2020 and January 2021, Manaus shocked the world with images of mass graves being dug for COVID-19 victims and of desperate patients dying for lack of oxygen in the hospitals.

According to Ferrante, after these publications, "the State Public Attorney's Office of Amazonas ... contacted me to participate in a technical note. I coordinated this technical note and we told them that Manaus would need a lockdown on June 1, 2020. On that same date, the governor of Amazonas decided to open non-essential activities in the state."

Then, throughout the second half of 2020, "I presented epidemiological models showing that Manaus would have a second wave... We were completely ignored, they even disseminated fake news, slander. I, who was the leader of the studies, received death threats. There was political reprisal.

"I have even presented the epidemiological models in the Amazonas Legislative Assembly, for its health commission. The deputies questioned me in November 2020 [beginning of the second wave]: 'you say that in two months Manaus will have six thousand deaths. How are we going to triple the number of deaths?' And in January 2021, at the peak of the second wave, we had 6,500 deaths from COVID. Up to that point of the pandemic, Manaus had had two thousand deaths."

And "there was the collapse of the health care system," Ferrante continues. "[Bolsonaro's former health minister General Eduardo]

Pazuello allowed an oxygen shortage. What is the ideal strategy to transport oxygen to Manaus? If it is an urgent demand, by air, with Brazilian Air Force planes. If it is a medium-long-term need, by boat via the Madeira River, which is much cheaper, much faster. At the time, the Madeira River was at the height of its flood and totally navigable. In two days, the oxygen would be in Manaus.

"Minister Pazuello decided, however, together with the National Traffic Department (DNIT), to send the oxygen via the BR-319 highway, which was a campaign promise of the Bolsonaro administration ... It took six days for it to get in Manaus. The worst logistical strategy ... just to promote lobbying for a campaign promise of Bolsonaro.

"Oxygen was not supposed to run out in Manaus. We warned four months in advance and pointed to the two emergency and medium- and long-term routes that were cheaper and faster. That was the negligence, responsible for deadly results, of former minister Pazuello and the president of the republic, Jair Messias Bolsonaro."

Ferrante also pointed to the role of the Manaus Industrial Complex, an industrial hub with about 600 industries that employs half a million people directly and indirectly, and the reopening of schools in the explosion of the second wave of COVID-19 in Manaus.

"Throughout the pandemic, the industries in Manaus never stopped," he stated. "Before and when the second wave started, the neighborhoods that presented the most cases of COVID were the industrial ones. So, without any doubt, industries and factories contributed to the spread of COVID, also because the protocols were not as efficient.

"This kept the pandemic active, with a constant community transmission rate, [which] contributed to the emergence of the second wave... [However], a situation that was stable exploded with the return of in-person classes.

"In several meetings with the Public Attorney's Office, the Legislative Assembly of Amazonas, the State Government, and the State Health Secretariat we warned that the return of in-person classes [at the end of September 2020] would trigger the second wave. Exactly 21 days later, the second wave started, and in January 2021 the health care system collapsed.

"The strategy of promoting a return of in-person classes earlier than other [Brazilian] states was orchestrated by the president of the republic [Jair Bolsonaro] and the governor of Amazonas Wilson Lima with the purpose of leading Manaus to 'herd immunity'. ... This did not lead to herd immunity, but to the emergence of a new variant, Gamma, which

today is responsible for two thirds of the deaths in Brazil. That is a crime of the pandemic resulting in deaths by the president of the republic, the governor of Amazonas and the former minister of health, confirmed by the report of the CPI [Parliamentary Investigation Commission of the Brazilian Senate]. We have also confirmed in a scientific article in the *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* that this action gave rise to the Gamma variant. That is already peer-reviewed and published scientific data. It's a fact.

"Some legal experts were reluctant to admit the pandemic crime resulting in death because they said that Bolsonaro did not create the pandemic. He didn't, but he, Pazuello, and Governor Lima did give rise to the Gamma variant by political negligence, encouraging a misguided public policy to try to get the population to herd immunity."

The role of hydroxychloroquine in the Manaus crisis

Hydroxychloroquine played a central role in the Bolsonaro administration's policy of "herd immunity" throughout the pandemic, especially in Manaus during the second wave. While oxygen was lacking in the city, the government was recommending the use of hydroxychloroquine as part of the so-called "COVID kit" for the Manaus health care system under collapse.

Ferrante claims that Bolsonaro's frenetic promotion of hydroxychloroquine as a quack cure for COVID-19 led people to believe that "the drug would solve the problem and they wouldn't have to stay at home. So, that helped increase community transmission."

He continues: "There is a study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* that reviewed the effects of hydroxychloroquine. It increases the time of hospitalization by an average of three days, it increases the risk of death and the need for ventilation, and it increases the severity of symptoms and the viral load of the patient. What happened then? Patients depending on longer hospitalizations, needing intubation because of the hydroxychloroquine, and a much worse scenario, including higher risk of death. This aggravated the health care system collapse. A drug was being given that worsened the condition of COVID patients, requiring on average, for each patient taking hydroxychloroquine, three more days in the hospital. That amid a collapse is very serious. Three days for one patient is crucial in terms of giving a vacancy to another. Now, consider everyone who received hydroxychloroquine, if you increase their time by three days.

"This is also the responsibility of President Bolsonaro and the Ministry of Health, specifically former minister Pazuello, because forcing this initiative [the use of hydroxychloroquine] contributed to the collapse of the health care system in Manaus and increased the number of deaths in the second wave."

The COVID-19 pandemic and state crimes against indigenous peoples

During the presidential election campaign in 2018, Bolsonaro stated at one of his rallies: "Where there is an indigenous area, there is wealth underneath it. We have to change that ... there won't be an inch demarcated for indigenous or *quilombola* areas [during my term]." Since he took office, in 2019, that policy has been implemented.

Most of the 775,000 indigenous people in Brazil, distributed in 436 indigenous lands over an area equivalent to 14 percent of the national territory, are located in the northern region of the country, particularly in

the state of Amazonas. Soon recognizing that the pandemic could increase violations of indigenous people's rights, particularly invasions of their lands, and the threat that an infectious disease like COVID-19 posed to these populations, Lucas Ferrante published in April 2020 a letter in *Science* presenting measures to protect them.

According to Ferrante, "We spoke [in the letter] of the need for social isolation, including avoiding air traffic to the Amazon, avoiding boat traffic. This isolation would be crucial mainly to prevent the virus from spreading inland. And we also classified the indigenous peoples as a risk and priority group to be vaccinated due to genetic factors. Respiratory viruses have always been used as weapons against indigenous peoples."

None of these warnings led to the implementation of public policies to protect Brazil's indigenous populations. On the contrary. In 2020, the first year of the pandemic, the invasion of indigenous lands grew by 137 percent compared to 2018. The vaccination rate among indigenous people, who have a record of broad adherence to vaccination campaigns in the country, is about 50 percent, much lower than the 70 percent of Brazil's total population. Only earlier this year, the Bolsonaro administration established a committee to protect indigenous peoples from COVID-19.

According to Ferrante, in several publications "we have pointed to specific provisional measures, or even presidential decrees by Bolsonaro himself ... with projects to arm landowners and favor the groups that are invading indigenous lands. He is arming these groups and dismantling environmental legislation and enforcement in their favor, and denying basic rights, medical supplies and even drinking water to indigenous peoples. Ricardo Salles, former minister of the environment, has even punished inspectors of the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama) who properly inspected indigenous lands in Pará. It is a process built for genocide."

One of the articles "questions the intention of the Federal Government to classify gold miners and cattle ranchers as traditional peoples. This is ridiculous. Thus, they would have the right to these indigenous areas. We show that there are more than 20,000 mineral prospectors in the Yanomami lands [in Amazonas and Roraima], using the coronavirus as a weapon against these indigenous populations." In another article, "we show that the death of an indigenous leader, a *cacique*, represents the extinction of an ethnic group because their knowledge is oral, transmitted by their elders, who belong to a risk-group."

The BR-319, which the Bolsonaro government has used to take oxygen to Manaus, is a highway that since 1988 has most of its almost 900 km unpaved, and connects Manaus to Porto Velho, capital of Rondônia. Ferrante's work has pointed out that along the highway there exists a combination of deforestation and threats to indigenous peoples.

"We had two papers published on January 21, one in *Science* and the other in *Nature*, about the indigenous issue and a new cycle of deforestation of the Amazon. This new publication in *Nature* shows that via the BR-319 highway, a new cycle of deforestation is emerging in the Amazon. Soybean planters from Mato Grosso do Sul are migrating to Rondônia, acquiring land at an extremely high value from cattle ranchers, and these cattle ranchers, who have taken a very large amount of money, are buying cheap land along the BR-319 highway.

"In another paper published last year ... we showed a network of land grabs on the BR-319, including invasion of indigenous lands in which the invaders are using the coronavirus as a weapon to decimate these populations ... And the rate of deforestation on the BR-319 highway is three times greater than that of the entire Amazon. We demonstrated in that article that the deforestation started after the promise to pave it in 2015.

"There are more than 18,000 indigenous peoples living in the Purus-Madeira interfluvium and in the area affected by the BR-319 highway, who should be consulted [for the paving of the highway] as established by ILO Convention 169 ... but [the government] refuses to consult with them. This

also represents a violation of indigenous peoples' rights.”



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