

# Brazil passes 650,000 COVID-19 deaths as ruling class adopts “endemic” narrative

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Last week, Brazil reached the terrible milestone of 650,000 recorded COVID-19 deaths, even as the administration of fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro is officially adopting the narrative that the deadly virus has reached an “endemic” stage.

In February, the country recorded 22,000 deaths, an average of nearly 800 deaths per day. In an interview with the daily *Estadão*, Fiocruz epidemiologist Jesem Orellana pointed to the seriousness of the pandemic in Brazil: “The number of about 650,000 known deaths in Brazil is tragically high (the second highest on the planet) and, in practice, is at least 15 percent higher due to underreporting.” Orellana added: “It is not impossible to reach 700,000 or even 800,000 known deaths from COVID-19, because if we continue to put the economic agenda above life, we will continue to have more and more preventable deaths... .”

In an interview with *SOS Brasil Soberano*, neuroscientist Miguel Nicolelis gave the scale of the underreporting scenario in Brazil, which prevents determining the real development of the pandemic in the country. He pointed to estimates by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington of the real number of infections in Brazil during the spread of Omicron: “If the underreporting was already 10 to 20 times in the weeks before Carnival, now we wouldn’t even be able to calculate... Some models suggest that we passed 2 million cases per day at the peak [of the Omicron variant in January-February].”

Countering the narrative promoted since November by the government and corporate media that Omicron is “mild,” Nicolelis explained, “If you add up all causes of death in the last two months, we had more deaths in those two months in 2022 than in the same two months in 2021.” In January and February of last year, Brazil was experiencing the wave of deaths provoked by the Gamma variant, which would reach its peak in March and April, driven by the reopening of schools.

Today, one month after the start of compulsory in-person learning and with only 45 percent of children between 5 and

11 having taken the first shot of the vaccine, there is a new outbreak of cases among children in this age group in Brazil. A recent Fiocruz bulletin showed that the number of daily cases of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in children aged 5 to 11 is already equal to its peak in the last week of 2021, with 400 cases per day. Fiocruz warns that “preliminary laboratory data suggest a halt in the drop in positive results for SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19).”

On March 4, Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais, registered an increase in COVID-19 ICU bed occupancy from 40.1 percent to 43.7 percent in 24 hours. Today, the occupancy of pediatric ICU beds is 100 percent in Salvador, capital of Bahia, and the Federal District.

The increase in COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations contrasts with the response of the government and the media, with news about the pandemic having disappeared from the front pages of major newspapers even before the start of the war in Ukraine. Faced with the current situation, Bolsonaro, following the actions of governments and ruling classes around the world, tweeted on Thursday that his Health Ministry is “studying the downgrading the current situation of COVID-19 in Brazil to endemic,” with a decision expected in the coming days.

At almost the same time, São Paulo state Governor João Doria announced that mask mandates in open places will be dropped starting on March 9. In Rio de Janeiro state, mask mandates in any establishment are now to be decided by each city hall, and the Federal District and Belo Horizonte have completely dropped their mandates.

Last week, São Paulo state Health Secretary Rossieli Soares declared that a decision will be made in the next two weeks on the wearing of masks inside school classrooms. Before being barred by the court this Saturday, mask mandates for children under 12 had already been dropped in the state of Rio Grande do Sul since February 26.

The statements by Bolsonaro and the governors criminally ignore the experience with the pandemic over the past two years. The continuous transmission of SARS-CoV-2 allowed the emergence of more transmissible mutations and the re-

infection of people already infected by the virus. Although it has not yet become significant in Brazil, the more transmissible Omicron subvariant BA.2 is already the dominant strain in several countries.

On *CNN Brasil*, the vice-president of the Brazilian Society of Infectology, Alexandre Naime Barbosa, said about the subvariant: “We can say that in the next two months, the tendency is that there will be a drop in the number of cases, a drop in the number of hospitalizations. This if no variant arises. Now, if BA.2 starts to predominate, we may have problems within six, eight, or 12 weeks.”

After months of Omicron being declared “mild” by governments and the corporate media around the world, the pandemic is said to be reaching a supposed “endemic” stage, where large-scale death becomes acceptable.

Vaccination has been promoted as the only measure to control the virus, which should be treated like the flu. The misleading use of the concept of endemic by the Bolsonaro administration, following in the footsteps of Joe Biden’s administration in the US, is intended to justify the acceptance of a “new normal” of mass death and millions of people suffering the effects of long COVID.

Among the scientists denouncing the adoption of “endemic” COVID-19, Australian epidemiologist, Dr. Raina MacIntyre, explained:

“Denial of the science of epidemiology is widespread, even among ‘experts.’ We are told repeatedly that SARS-CoV-2 will become ‘endemic.’ But it will never be endemic because it is an epidemic disease and always will be. The key difference is spread. As an epidemic disease, SARS-CoV-2 will always find the unvaccinated, under-vaccinated, or people with waning immunity and spread rapidly in those groups. Typically, true epidemic infections are spread from person to person, the worst being airborne transmission, and display a waxing and waning pattern such as we have already seen with multiple waves of SARS-CoV-2. Cases rise rapidly over days or weeks, as we have seen Alpha, Delta and Omicron. No truly endemic disease—malaria, for example—does this.”

Moreover, in conjunction with the “endemic” narrative, the campaign for the end of protective measures against COVID-19 creates the conditions for the rampant exploitation of the working class, with ever-increasing pressure for workers with symptoms to return to workplaces, and children to remain in schools regardless of the risk of outbreaks to ensure that their parents go into crowded factories, warehouses and other workplaces to ensure the profits of big corporations.

The vaccine is a critical component in fighting the pandemic, but the campaign by the media and governments for acceptance of the pandemic are showing their

catastrophic effect in the lowering of vaccination rates. Only 40.37 percent of people over 18 took the booster shot throughout Brazil, and in the state of São Paulo the number of booster shots given dropped from 1,734,966 in the second week of January to 443,662 last week.

In opposition to the capitalist governments’ campaign, forcing the population to accept the “new normal” of mass COVID-19 infections and death, the working class must fight to build a massive movement to end the pandemic.

Only seriously applied public health measures like temporary lockdowns, massive testing and contact tracing, vaccination of the entire world population and mask mandates are capable of ending large-scale infection and death.

Understanding the need for collective protective measures is decisive for the implementation of an elimination-eradication program. On the Facebook page of the Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Brazil (CBES-BR), workers spoke favorably to this demand, denouncing the removal of restrictions against COVID-19.

Karla, a mother in the Federal District, denounced the campaign for the end of mask mandates and the covering up of the situation of COVID-19 in the schools: “Here in the FD, the governor has again dropped mask mandates in open environments. There is no news about the situation in schools, it has always been covered up and packed with lies, they will never expose any negative situation that there may be.”

She pointed to the possibility of new outbreaks after the Carnival holiday, which took place last week, denounced the “endemic” narrative and advocated protective measures: “Let’s wait for the post-Carnival period, where there were many crowds without any care and protection. I haven’t heard anything about the drop of mask mandates in schools. What I have heard today is that the crazy so-called health minister wants to change pandemic to endemic. The only absolute certainty I have is that I will continue wearing masks, keeping my social distance and taking 70 percent alcohol disinfectant with me; I have no difficulty or inconvenience in continuing to protect myself.”

Esmeralda, a teacher in the state of Ceará, criticized the end of mandatory masking in schools: “It seems to me that Rio Grande do Sul is going to dispense with the use of masks. I wouldn’t like the same thing to happen here. Wearing a mask is hard, but very necessary still.”



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