

Brazilian president fires his health minister



Brasilia, April 16 (RHC)-- Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has fired his health minister after weeks of infighting and threats over the country's coronavirus strategy.

"I just heard from President Jair Bolsonaro the notification of my discharge as Health Minister," the outgoing minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta tweeted Thursday, thanking his colleagues and wishing success for his replacement.

Bolsonaro announced that he will replace Mandetta with Nelson Teich, an oncologist who supported his presidential campaign.

Mandetta was one of Brazil's biggest proponents of social distancing, supporting governors' decisions to shut down schools and businesses. But his approach put him at odds with Bolsonaro, who has previously downplayed COVID-19 as nothing more than a "little flu" and warned that the economic fallout from isolation could be worse than the virus itself.

Mandetta also challenged the president's insistence that malaria drugs are the solution to the COVID-19 crisis. While Brazil has launched trials involving the drugs, Mandetta has warned there is no evidence that they are effective in treating the symptoms.

National and local governments in Brazil have issued mixed messaging on how to behave during the pandemic. While Bolsonaro has been pushing against strict restrictions, state and local governments in some of the country's hardest-hit areas have promoted social distancing, with firefighters and police in the streets urging people to stay indoors.

In Rio de Janeiro, governor Wilson Witzel extended quarantine measures in most of the state's major cities through the end of April and urged people to stay home.

Two governors and more than ten members of Bolsonaro's inner circle have tested positive for coronavirus. But Bolsonaro has been seen flouting the guidelines issued by his own health experts, wandering into bakeries and greeting supporters with handshakes and hugs.

The decision to remove Mandetta comes as coronavirus continues to spread through the vast Latin American country: beds in intensive care units are filling up in Brazil's biggest cities and in the northern Amazon region, authorities warn the health system is already collapsing.

Brazil has reported more than 30,000 confirmed cases of coronavirus infection. More than 1,900 people have died.

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