

Brazil's Amazonas state running out of oxygen amid COVID surge

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Health workers transport a patient at Getulio Vargas hospital, amid COVID-19 outbreak in Manaus, Brazil. (Photo: Bruno Kelly / Reuters)

Brasilia, January 15 (RHC)-- The Brazilian state of Amazonas is running out of oxygen during a renewed surge in COVID-19 deaths, its government said on Thursday, with media reporting that people on respirators were dying of suffocation in hospitals.

The state has made a dramatic appeal to the United States to send a military transport plane to the capital city Manaus with oxygen cylinders.

Brazilian Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello said the hospital system in the city is collapsing from a second wave of COVID-19 and it is running out of oxygen. He said the city's hospitals were short of medical staff as deaths surge again.

"They took my father off the oxygen," Raissa Floriano said outside the 28 de Agosto hospital in Manaus, where people protested that relatives suffering serious cases of COVID-19 were being unhooked from ventilators for lack of oxygen. Sobbing, Floriano said she was looking for an oxygen cylinder to save her 73-year-old father Alfonso.

Brazil is home to the world's second-deadliest coronavirus outbreak after the US. The country has reported more than 207,000 deaths, according to a Johns Hopkins University tally. Manaus was one of the first Brazilian cities struck by a spiralling death count and caseload from the first wave of the pandemic last year.

Health authorities said oxygen supplies had run out at some hospitals and intensive care wards were so full that many patients were being airlifted to other states. Amazonas health secretary Marcellus Campelo said the state needs almost three times more oxygen than it can produce locally and appealed for supplies from other states.

Public health experts gave dramatic accounts of people dying of COVID-19 in ICUs with no oxygen. "The oxygen ran out and the hospitals have turned into suffocation chambers," Fiocruz-Amazonia researcher Jesem Orellana told the Folha de S.Paulo newspaper. "Patients who manage to survive could suffer permanent brain damage," he said.

Meanwhile, a new variant of the virus was detected in Japan on Sunday in four people who had come from Amazonas and the UK slapped a ban on new arrivals from Brazil due to fears of the new variant.

Researchers said the new variant could be contributing to the sharp rise in cases in Amazonas state, although they were conducting more studies to ascertain if it is more contagious than earlier versions of the coronavirus.

The neighboring state of Para has announced it was banning travel boats coming down the river from Amazonas, citing a rise in cases and the identification of the new variant. The UK said it would ban travellers from Brazil, several other South American countries and Portugal. The new variant features 12 mutations, including one also found in highly infectious variants recently discovered in the UK and South Africa that have begun circulating around the globe.

Researchers from the Oswaldo Cruz Amazonia Foundation said the new variant found in Japan likely appeared in northern Brazil between December and January.

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