

COVID surge creates severe oxygen crisis in Brazil

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A COVID-19 patient is transferred to the intensive care unit of Hospital Sao Paulo. [Photo: Amanda Perobelli/Reuters]

Sao Paulo, March 25 (RHC)-- Recently, the jungle city of Manaus sent shockwaves across the globe when hospitals ran out of oxygen with lethal consequences – turning the city into the world's COVID-19 epicentre.

Two months on, Brazil's COVID catastrophe has never been worse. Now, with new coronavirus variants and a series of grim records of deaths and infections, there are fears that a lack of oxygen supplies seen in Manaus, the Amazonas state capital, could unfold elsewhere.

Brazil is approaching 300,000 COVID deaths and it set another weekly record last week with 2,255 deaths and 513,408 new cases, according to Johns Hopkins University. Amid this surge, Fiocruz epidemiologist Jesem Orellana told that a lack of sufficient oxygen, intubation drugs and medical supplies could push Brazil's hospitals closer to collapse in the coming weeks. "The signs are very clear. Today, the country is becoming Manaus," he said.

According to Orellana, the cascade of new infections and patients in critical condition requiring intensive care is draining the country's oxygen, medicines and equipment resources.

In nearly all of Brazil's 26 states and its federal district, COVID intensive care units have become so overloaded, with several at 100 percent capacity, that reports have emerged of patients dying on hospital floors in the absence of available beds. Other deaths have been reported because of oxygen shortages due to extremely high demand.

In the city of Campo Bom, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, six COVID patients died last Friday due to problems with oxygen supplies at Hospital Lauro Reus. Local witnesses described scenes of terror as doctors cried for help when liquid storage tanks emptied for 30 minutes. According to a statement from the hospital, the deaths were due to a failure in the oxygen distribution system, rather than a lack of oxygen.

However, Lannes Osorio, the health secretary of the hospital, informed Al Jazeera that the problem had occurred due to overflowing COVID intensive care units which are currently operating at 300 percent above average. "The question of low oxygen supplies is not limited to our hospital or state, it's a national problem," he said.

Not even São Paulo, the richest city in Brazil, is immune to a lack of oxygen in hospitals that treat COVID patients. Less than 12 hours later, similar scenes occurred at the EPA Ermelino Matarazzo hospital on the east side of the capital.

The city reported that 10 patients had to be transferred on Friday night due to a lack of oxygen input. However, São Paulo's health secretary was also dismissive about inadequate stocks of oxygen, informing Al Jazeera that the problem had been purely technical.

On Monday, the city of São Paulo reported that more than 89 percent of its ICU beds were filled. Meanwhile, the São Paulo state reported a record 1,021 deaths on Monday alone, the highest number since the start of the pandemic.

São Paulo's health secretary urged Brazilians to respect preventive measures to reduce the transmission of the virus, explosion of hospital demands and depletion of medical supplies.

Fiocruz researcher Orellana also said infections would continue to soar in the next 15 days if state governors do not insist on implementing strict lockdowns in the upcoming weeks.

Tensions between Bolsonaro vs governors

President Jair Bolsonaro, however, has resisted the idea, seemingly fearful of the economic impact and a backlash against his loyal supporters. The country has suffered 10 percent of the world's COVID deaths,

according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Last Friday, Bolsonaro accused mayors and governors of acting like dictators by ramping up containment measures, in what critics described as a “boycott” against efforts to contain the ferocious second wave.

Bahia Governor Rui Costa accused Bolsonaro in a local TV interview of acting as an “ally to the virus and the country’s wave of deaths”.

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