

Bolsonaro under pressure as Brazil COVID deaths top 300,000

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Brasilia, March 26 (RHC)-- Brazil has topped 300,000 confirmed COVID-19 deaths, becoming the second country to do so amid a spike in infections that has seen the South American country report record death tolls in recent days.

On Wednesday, Brazil's health ministry reported 2,009 daily COVID-19 deaths, bringing its pandemic total to 300,685. On Tuesday, the country saw a single-day record of 3,251 deaths.

The United States reached the grim milestone on December 14 but it has a larger population than Brazil.

According to local media reports in Brazil, the latest coronavirus figures might be affected by changes in the government's counting system. Newly appointed Health Minister Marcelo Queiroga said in a news

conference that he was going to check whether the numbers had been artificially reduced.

With daily death tolls at pandemic highs, state governors and mayors in Brazil have expressed fears that April could be as bad as March for the country's overwhelmed hospitals.

Just in the past 75 days, Brazil has registered 100,000 confirmed coronavirus deaths, a spike health experts blame on a lack of political coordination in fighting the virus, new variants that spread more easily and a disregard for health protocols.

President Jair Bolsonaro has consistently downplayed the severity of the pandemic, insisting the economy must be kept humming to prevent worse hardship, and he has criticised health measures imposed by local leaders.

As the pandemic has worsened in recent weeks, Bolsonaro has shown signs of taking it more seriously. The return of his political nemesis, former left-wing President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, also appears to have stirred him into action. Lula's corruption convictions have recently been annulled, allowing him to run in next year's election.

On Tuesday, Bolsonaro, a far-right former army captain who has won international notoriety for his efforts to block lockdown measures, gave a televised address in which he defended his handling of the pandemic and pledged to deliver more vaccines. But his comments were jeered by pot-banging protests across the continent-sized country.

On Wednesday, he said the government would seek more coordination with state governors, with weekly meetings to discuss coronavirus-fighting measures in a newly launched committee. But the pandemic outlook remains bleak.

"The outlook for the coming weeks will be very difficult," former Health Minister Nelson Teich, who left the ministry after clashing with the president, told the Reuters news agency. "Our vaccination programme is slow."

In his first news conference as health minister on Wednesday, Queiroga said the government aims to speed up the inoculation drive and pledged to deliver one million shots a day.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) warned on Tuesday that the situation in Brazil was "dire," and threatened the rest of the region. "The virus continues to surge dangerously across Brazil," PAHO Director Dr Carissa Etienne said in Washington, DC.

"Cases and deaths are increasing, and (intensive care) bed occupancy is very high in many states."

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