

Brazil's ex-President Bolsonaro seeks U.S. tourist visa

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Application for six-month U.S. visa comes as Jair Bolsonaro faces accusations he helped incite riot in Brazil's capital.

Washington, January 31 (RHC)-- Brazil's former President Jair Bolsonaro has applied for a six-month tourist visa to remain in the United States, his lawyer said, as the far-right politician faces an investigation at home into accusations he helped incite this month's riot in the Brazilian capital.

U.S. authorities received Bolsonaro's visa application on Friday, his lawyer, Felipe Alexandre, told the Reuters news agency in an e-mailed statement on Monday. The news was first reported by The Financial Times.

While the application is processed, Bolsonaro will remain in the U.S., Alexandre said. "He would like to take some time off, clear his head, and enjoy being a tourist in the United States for a few months before deciding what his next step will be," the lawyer said.

“Whether or not he will use the full six months will be up to him and whatever strategy we agree to embark on based on his plans as they develop.”

Bolsonaro -- who left Brazil for the U.S. just days before his successor, left-wing President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, was inaugurated on January 1st -- has faced widespread criticism after a mob of his supporters rioted in the capital of Brasilia on January 8th.

Thousands of Bolsonaro supporters ransacked the country's Congress, presidential palace and Supreme Court in a bid to pressure the military to overturn the October election results, which saw Lula narrowly defeat his far-right rival in a tense run-off.

Bolsonaro, a former army captain who has expressed admiration for the military regime that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985, had falsely claimed for months that the country's electronic voting system was vulnerable to fraud.

He maintained a long public silence after the election results were confirmed and never formally recognised Lula's victory — prompting some observers to say that he helped set the stage for the riot in Brasilia, a charge Bolsonaro rejects.

After the attack, Bolsonaro said on Twitter that peaceful protest is part of democracy, but vandalism and the invasion of public buildings were “exceptions to the rule”. His son, Senator Flavio Bolsonaro, also slammed attempts to link the former president to the riot, saying his father had been “virtually incommunicado” since the election results were announced.

But in mid-January, Brazil's Supreme Court agreed to open an investigation into allegations that Bolsonaro encouraged the anti-democratic protests “that resulted in vandalism and violence in Brasilia.”

“Public figures who continue to cowardly conspire against democracy trying to establish a state of exception will be held accountable,” Supreme Court Justice Alexandre de Moraes, who is leading the probes, said at the time.

Bolsonaro has been in the U.S. state of Florida, where he briefly sought care at a local hospital earlier this month for abdominal pain linked to a knife wound he received during the 2018 presidential race, which he won.

The former president previously said in an interview with CNN Brasil that he had planned to return to Brazil by the end of January and was considering moving his departure earlier for health reasons. He is understood to have entered the U.S. on a visa for visiting world leaders, which expires on Tuesday as Bolsonaro is no longer on official business.

A Bolsonaro ally, former Justice Minister Anderson Torres, also was on vacation in Florida when the January 8 riot in Brazil's capital broke out. But Torres, who was in charge of security in Brasilia at the time of the attack, has since returned to Brazil, where he was arrested on accusations of “connivance” and “omission.”

Bolsonaro's presence in the U.S. has drawn concern from some American legislators, who recently urged President Joe Biden “not [to] provide shelter for him, or any authoritarian who has inspired such violence against democratic institutions.”

“We should cooperate fully with Brazilian authorities in investigating any role Mr. Bolsonaro or those around him played in the events of January 8, and any crimes he committed when in office,” dozens of US Congress members said in a January 12 letter (PDF) to Biden.

Nearly 1,400 people have been arrested in relation to the attack in Brasilia, with Lula's government pledging to hold accountable all those who participated in the riots, as well as those who helped plan and

carry them out.

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