

# Coronavirus crisis in Brazil



President Jair Bolsonaro [Photo: ZUMA Press]

***Brazil has one of the world's highest numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths, no thanks to their president. ANNABELLE LIANG reports.***

When the number of COVID-19 cases started rising last year, many countries including Singapore went into lockdown. Their leaders took the virus seriously. They wore face masks and asked the public to do the same.

In most countries, schools conducted lessons online so that students could stay safe at home. People did not go to their workplaces unless it was necessary. Places where large groups gathered, such as cinemas, were closed. These countries have mostly had fewer cases since. They are now vaccinating their populations, and opening their borders to more visitors.

However, things are getting worse in Brazil. The country has over 14 million infections and around 400,000 deaths. One reason why the numbers are so large is that Brazil is a huge country. With more than 200 million people living there, its population is almost 40 times the size of Singapore.

However, experts say that Brazil should not have been so badly hit. They blame the president, Jair Bolsonaro, for letting things get out of control.

Mr Bolsonaro has refused to put Brazil under lockdown. He said the virus was “just a little flu” and told businesses to stay open. He has also broken official guidelines asking people to stay a distance away from others in public.

Mr Bolsonaro has attended anti-lockdown rallies. At one rally, he grasped the hands of people next to him and raised them up to the cheering crowd. Later on, he posed for pictures with the crowd and lifted children in the air. Such stunts went against the health authorities’ instructions that people should keep a safe distance from one another. At another event, Mr Bolsonaro did push-ups with men in military outfits. “Above all, (people) want freedom. They want democracy, they want respect,” he said in a video that was posted online.

Leaders like Mr Bolsonaro are known as “populists” — more interested in being popular by being entertaining and telling supporters things that make them happy in the short term, instead of actually solving problems.

### **Unwise leadership**

Mr Bolsonaro’s actions were unwise. People need leaders like him for guidance on how to respond to the virus. Because of the way he was acting, many went on with life as usual. It appeared as though the virus was not dangerous. This was far from the truth.

The virus spread. Hospitals were packed with the sick and dying who needed help. “It’s not a flu. It’s the worst thing we have ever faced in our professional lives,” Jacques Sztajnbok said in an interview with CNN. Dr Sztajnbok works at the intensive care unit at the Emilio Ribas Infectious Disease Institute in Sao Paulo. Even as he treats patients, he worries about his own health.

Many hospitals have had to turn patients away. They are running out of beds, oxygen supplies, and medication. This has taken a toll on staff.

“It creates a great sense of guilt among healthcare workers,” said Rita Prieb, a **psychologist** at the Clinical Hospital of Porto Alegre. “They think, ‘I chose one and left behind the other.’”

“Only people who have seen it know,” Diego Vieira told *The Washington Post* newspaper. “The patient dies... begging for air, looking at you with desperation in search of help. But, if I don’t have oxygen, how can I help?” Dr Vieira’s clinic in the state of Ceara had run out of resources. He had to choose between sending a young man or an elderly woman for treatment at the hospital.

“And then, imagine spending 24 hours on a shift, only to leave the hospital and see people on the streets — drinking, talking, getting together in big groups, as if nothing is happening,” Dr Vieira added.

## The road ahead

It is a difficult road ahead for Brazil. President Bolsonaro is still against a lockdown. He fears that it would affect the economy. But, not having one has arguably made things worse. More people are lining up in the slums, or favelas, for food handouts every day.

In the Heliopolis favela, households receive a bowl of pasta with meat, a portion of rice, two packets of biscuits and a carton of milk. This is usually their only meal.

“The vast majority of people who live in the favelas work in the informal economy, as cleaners in homes or helping to bake cakes,” said Marcivan Barreto, who manages handouts in the favela and other areas. “So, when businesses close or houses stop using them, they feel the impact.”

There are small glimmers of hope. Some Brazilian states have imposed lockdowns of their own without Mr Bolsonaro’s support. The country has also begun to vaccinate the elderly. However, Brazil is now dealing with a new variant of the virus as well. Vaccines may be less effective against this new variant.

“The new P1 variant is much more transmissible, and very probably it is also much more aggressive. And, it is contaminating a lot of young people,” said Margareth Dalcolmo, a **pneumologist** and researcher at the Fiocruz Institute.

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### VOCAB BUILDER

**psychologist** (say “sai-ko-lo-jist”; noun) = someone who studies the human mind, emotions, and behaviour.

**pneumologist** (say “new-mo-lo-gist”; noun) = a specialist in diseases affecting our breathing.