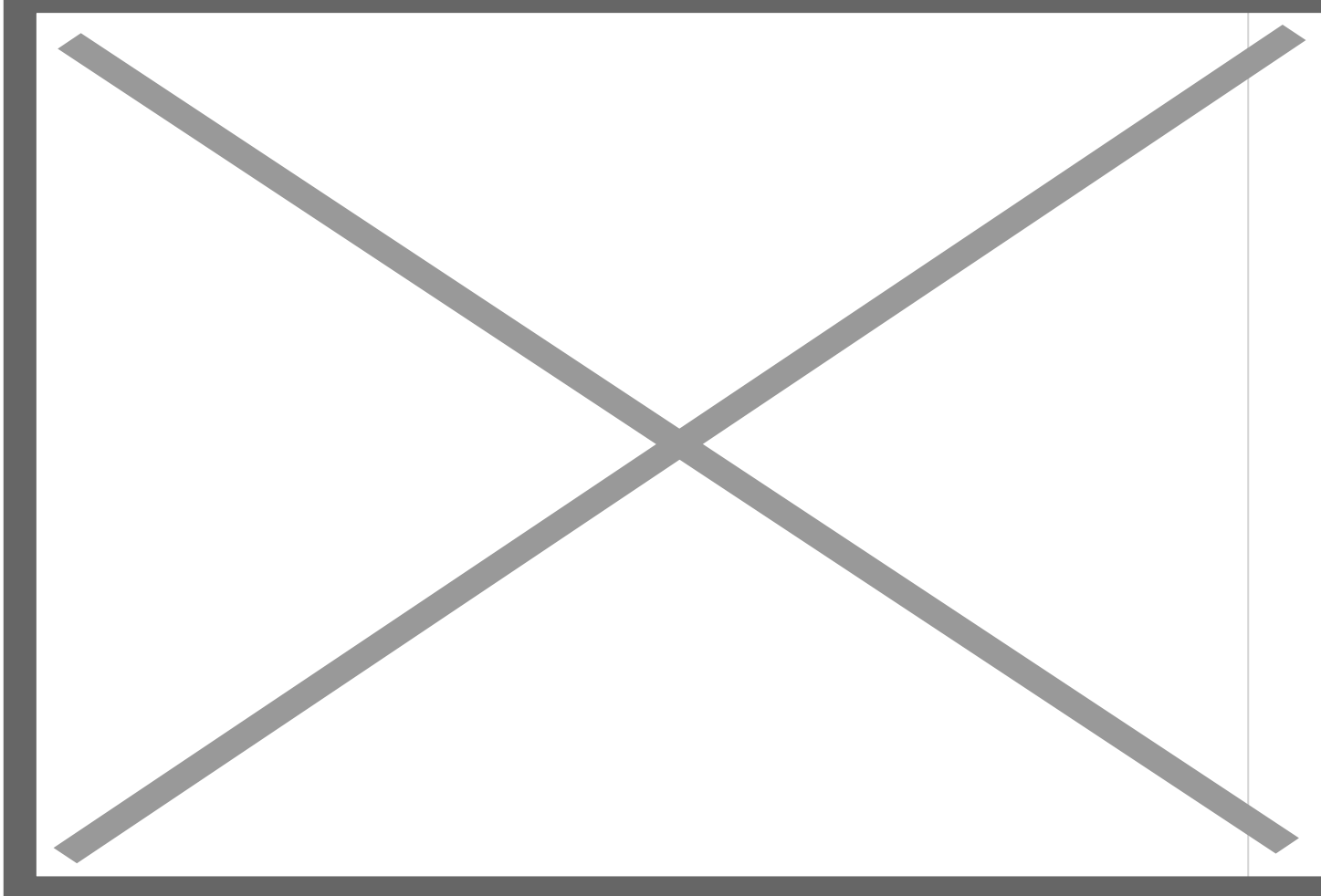


COVID-hit Amazonas state in Brazil receives emergency supplies

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A man holds an oxygen tank in Manaus, as medical workers are battling a shortage of oxygen to respond to COVID-19 cases. (Photo: Michael Dantas / AFP)

Brasilia, January 16 (RHC)-- The Brazilian state of Amazonas has received more emergency supplies of oxygen after authorities appealed for help to treat COVID-19 patients amid a devastating surge of

infections and hospitalisations.

Brazil's air force said on Saturday that a second flight had landed in Manaus, the state capital, with eight tanks of liquid oxygen, following an earlier emergency delivery of five tanks, and the navy said in a statement that it is sending 40 respirators. The army also said it had evacuated 12 patients from hospitals in Manaus to the northern city of Sao Luis overnight.

Brazilian Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello said earlier this week that the hospital system in Manaus was collapsing due to COVID-19, as facilities were short-staffed and quickly running out of oxygen.

Brazil has recorded more than 8.3 million cases of COVID-19, according to Johns Hopkins University, the third-highest tally in the world. It has also reported more than 208,200 deaths since the pandemic began – second only behind the United States.

Venezuela also said on Saturday that it has sent the first batch of oxygen supplies to Amazonas, which should arrive in Manaus on Sunday. The Venezuelan government “will supply oxygen for the duration of the emergency situation in the state of Amazonas”, Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza said.

Mass graves were dug in Manaus during the first wave of the pandemic last year, and the continuing crisis has spurred anger against far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who has downplayed the seriousness of the novel coronavirus and the need for public health measures.

On Friday, people in neighbourhoods across Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and Brasilia banged pots from their windows in anger over Bolsonaro's handling of the pandemic. That same day, Bolsonaro said the government had already done what it could in Manaus. “The problem is terrible there. Now, we have done our part,” he said.

A new variant of COVID-19 discovered in Brazil also raised alarm this week. The Brazilian variant shares some characteristics with those found in Britain and South Africa, which are believed by scientists to be more transmissible but not to cause more severe disease.

The United Kingdom said on Friday that it was suspending travel from South America and Portugal due to the new variant. “We don't have cases at the moment, but this is a precautionary approach,” UK Transport Secretary Grant Shapps told BBC.

Italy has followed suit, with Health Minister Roberto Speranza saying on Saturday that anyone who has transited Brazil in the last 14 days would be barred from entering the country while travellers arriving in Italy from Brazil will need to take a test for the virus. “It is critical for our scientists to study the new strain. In the meantime, we are taking a very cautious approach,” Speranza said.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization's health emergencies director, Mike Ryan, warned on Friday that “the situation in Amazonas and particularly in Manaus has deteriorated significantly over the last couple of weeks.” Ryan said other regions of Brazil, as well as across Central and South America, are also struggling to respond to the second wave of the pandemic. Still, he said, hospitalisations have risen steadily in Amazonas state since mid-December and were particularly worrying.

“Clearly if this continues we're going to see a wave that is greater than what was a catastrophic wave in April and May in Amazonas and particularly in Manaus, which is a tragedy in itself,” Ryan told reporters.

“The ICU occupancy right now in Manaus is 100 percent over the full last two weeks. This is a health system under extreme pressure.” He said in addition to oxygen shortages, medical staff are lacking gloves and basic personal protective equipment (PPE). Transporting oxygen from other states into Manaus is also a complicated and difficult process, Ryan added.

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