

Doctors warn Manaus COVID-19 crisis could strike across Brazil



Gravediggers work at the Parque Taruma cemetery in Manaus, Brazil. (Photo: Bruno Kelly / Reuters)

Brasilia, January 26 (RHC)-- With hospitals overrun and supplies of oxygen running out, Brazilian epidemiologist Jesem Orellana said COVID-19 patients' hospital beds in Manaus, the capital of the

country's Amazonas region, turned into "asphyxiation chambers."

"Manaus is lost," said Orellana, who described the city as an open-air laboratory "where all types of negligence and inhumanity are possible" and in which people are dying at home with no medical support. He warned that the collapse of the local healthcare system, propelled in part by the discovery of a potentially more contagious variant of COVID-19 in the region, could happen in other parts of Brazil, too.

"It is not only possible that it will happen, it is already happening," Orellana, who works at Fiocruz Amazonia, a public health research centre in Manaus, told reporters. "There are people in the state of Para who have died from a lack of oxygen. When you start getting low on oxygen supplies, you start having problems with increased demand for hospital beds and that could have a domino effect."

Brazil has recorded more than 216,000 deaths linked to COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, the second highest total in the world after the United States, according to Johns Hopkins University data. It has also reported at least 8.8 million cases.

The federal government's lack of a cohesive plan to rein in the pandemic or people's behaviour has riled medical professionals. Right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro has minimised the gravity of the virus, refused to receive the vaccine, and criticised lockdown and social-distancing orders issued by local government officials.

On January 15, Bolsonaro said the government had done what it could in Manaus. "The problem is terrible there. Now, we have done our part," he said. But the attorney-general's office has said the ministry of health ministry was allegedly warned nearly a week before oxygen stock reached critical levels in the city, but failed to inform federal authorities.

A health worker at Getulio Vargas hospital amid the COVID-19 outbreak in Manaus [Bruno Kelly/Reuters] Orellana said while oxygen supplies have drawn international headlines, the real problem has been "a failure of government management and logistics." He called on international agencies such as the World Health Organization to act as observers in Manaus, "because it is no longer possible to trust the different levels of management leading the pandemic."

Despite a steep rise in cases, many in Manaus still flew to Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, said local obstetrician, Dr Alexandre Staviack, who added that the virus has reached small towns and could overwhelm their hospital systems.

COVID-19 infections surged by 125 percent in Manaus between January 7 and January 22, according to the National Council of Health Secretaries and Brazilian media. Staviack said doctors have noticed an increase in the number of premature births in Manaus, as pregnant women with COVID-19 had to have caesareans due to their low oxygen levels. The threat of COVID-19 also propelled some pregnant women to take drastic steps, he said.

"They're afraid. They avoid going to the hospital except if they've gone into labour."

Meanwhile, concerns are growing that the new variant of COVID-19 found in Amazonas could easily spread, especially to parts of the country where healthcare access is limited.



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