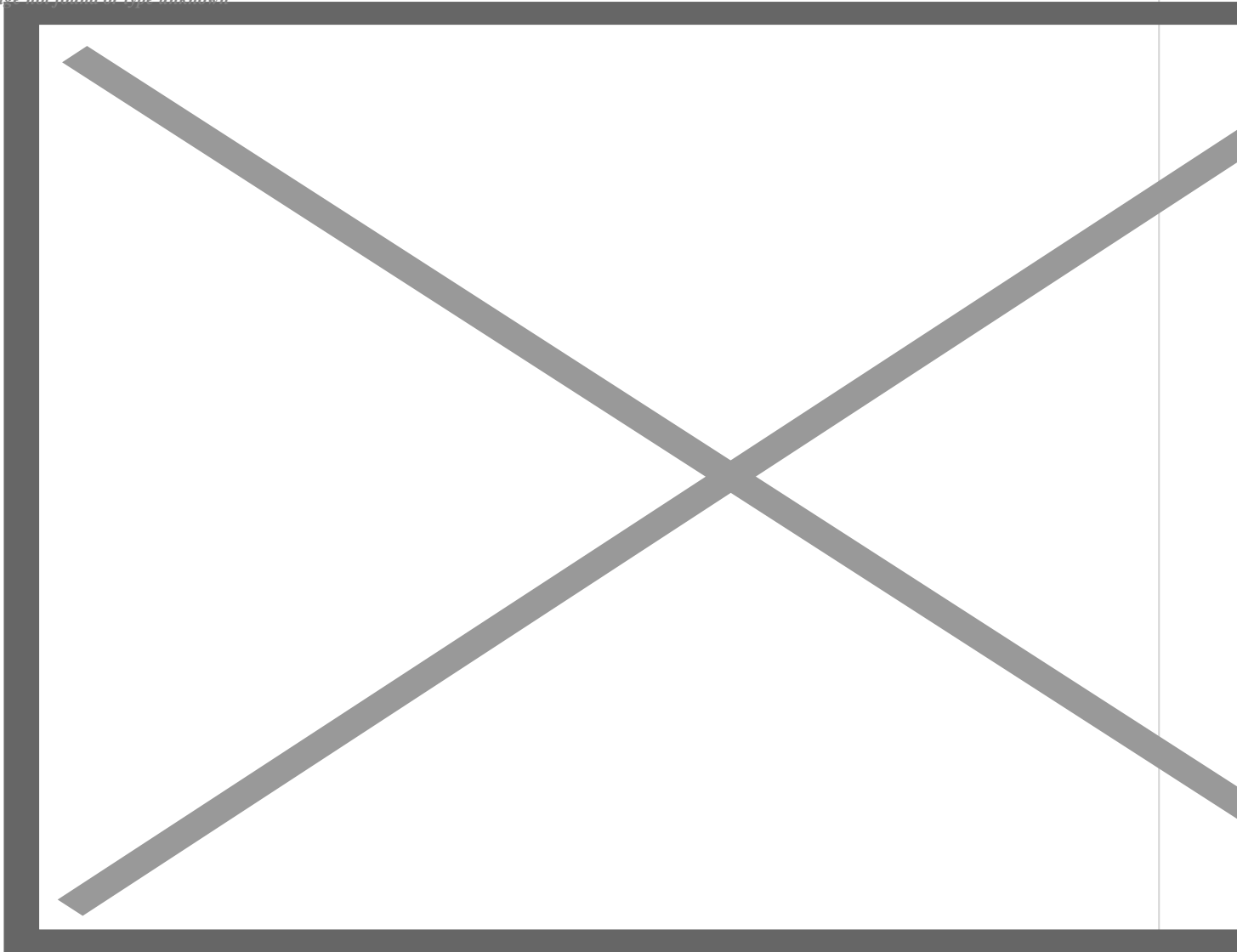


Brazil's COVID surge sparks regional fears

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Brazil is threatening regional countries due to COVID virus.?

Brasilia, April 11 (RHC)-- Almost one year ago to the day, the jungle city of Manaus grabbed international headlines after a flood of COVID-19 deaths forced gravediggers to dig mass burials – catapulting the city into the centre of Brazil's coronavirus outbreak.

Those scenes are now being repeated throughout Brazil, where authorities are working day and night to bury the dead, with experts warning that the country's funeral services could be the next to topple.

Since the start of the year, an uncontrollable second wave has pushed Brazil over the 300,000 death mark. As the country continues to hit grim milestones – a record 4,247 deaths on Thursday alone – the entire South American nation is now the global COVID-19 epicentre, with experts warning that 5,000 Brazilians could lose their lives in a single day in April.

Much of the fear is being directed to the P1 variant, linked to the Brazilian Amazon. If Brazil cannot control its high transmission rate, experts fear the country's healthcare tragedy could endanger the world. If the virus is left to circulate freely, it could create the ideal breeding ground for new and even more deadly variants.

Brazil's neighbours have sealed off their borders to the country in a desperate attempt to prevent new variants from bleeding into the rest of the continent and harming vaccine efficiency. "We're very concerned. The staggering amount of deaths in Brazil in just a few months is our biggest worry," virologist and researcher Humberto Debat, from the National Institute of Agricultural Technology told Al Jazeera.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is increasingly being blamed for undermining the severity of the virus. Even in the pandemic's darkest hour, the far-right leader continues to ignore calls from health officials for a national lockdown, attacks the use of masks, ignores science, peddles unproven remedies and told Brazilians this week "there's no use crying over spilled milk", referring to Brazil's soaring death toll.

"Unfortunately, we have a denialist president who refuses to follow science and encourages the public to follow," said Ethel Maciel, a professor at the Federal University of São Paulo. Experts have said a lack of social distancing measures has created the ideal environment for variants to mutate.

Since June 2020, Brazil's infections and deaths marooned at a steady plateau of approximately 1,000 deaths a day, leading many to believe the worst was over. For months, Brazilians commuted on crammed public transport and packed its beaches, bars and nightclubs.

Officials and experts are concerned about the speed with which the P1 variant, which is likely more infectious, is spreading and the damage it could pose globally. "The virus has become 'synchronised' in the whole country, with intensive care units in several states at over 90 percent capacity," said epidemiologist Daniel Villela from the Fiocruz branch in Rio de Janeiro.

As Brazil's health system caves in, with intubation drugs and oxygen stocks critically low, Villela also told Al Jazeera that oversaturated hospitals were causing more deaths.

Meanwhile, Brazil's painfully slow vaccine rollout, the result of disorganisation and a lack of urgency from Bolsonaro is worrying. To date, fewer than 10 percent of Brazil's 212 million people have been vaccinated.

"The only way out is accelerating our vaccine drive and national coordinated COVID protocols," explained Villela. But after Bolsonaro refused to implement a national lockdown on Wednesday, experts fear transmission rates will continue to skyrocket.

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