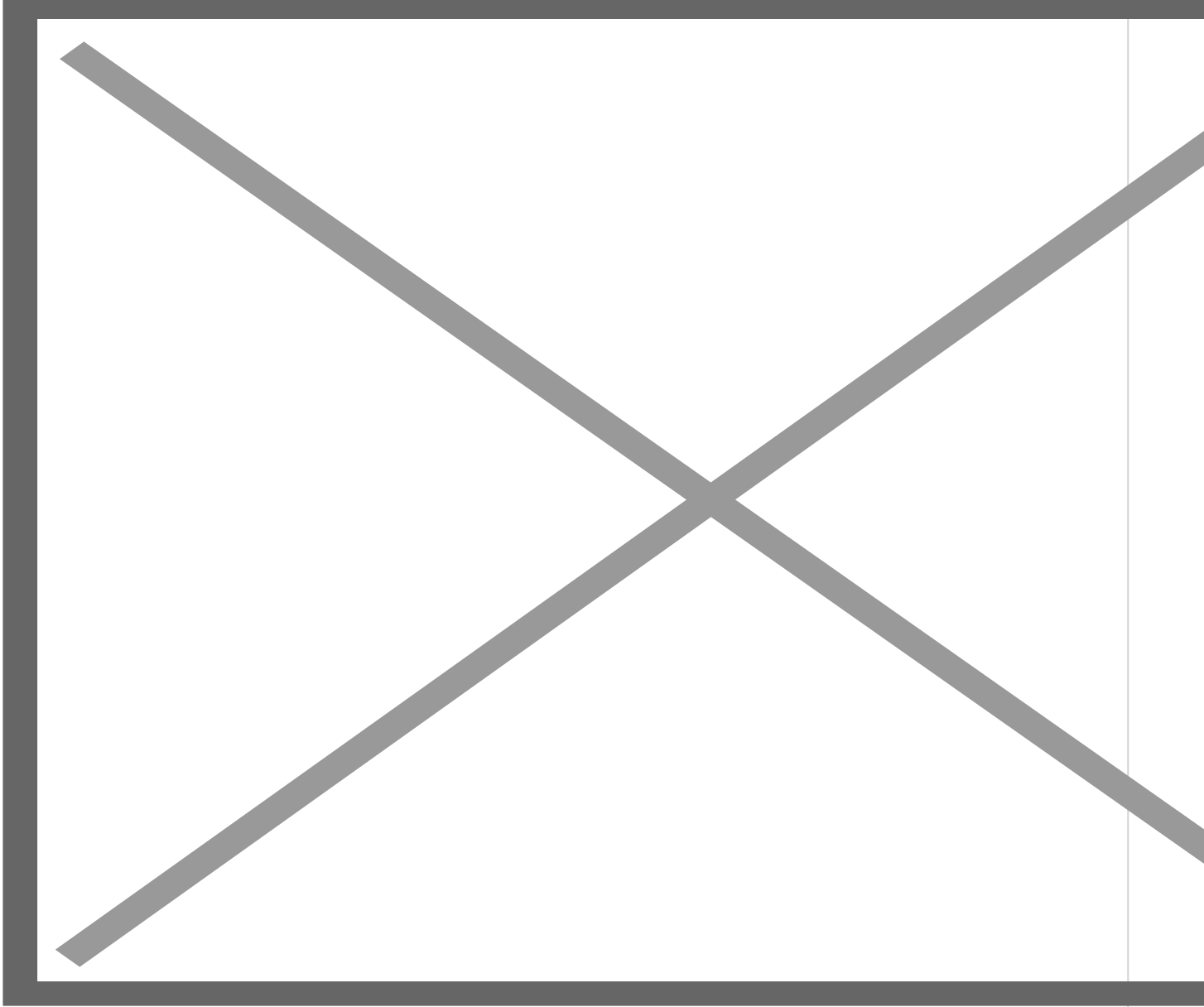


Brazilian Senate investigates Bolsonaro's handling of COVID- 19

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Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has faced increasing pressure to account for his government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. [Photo: Evaristo Sa/AFP]

Brasilia, April 15 (RHC)-- The Brazilian Senate has launched an inquiry into President Jair Bolsonaro's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, widely condemned by medical experts as one of the world's worst. The country's death toll from the disease, the second-highest after the United States, surpassed 360,000 on Wednesday, as the seven-day average of daily deaths remains above 3,000. The National Council of Health Secretaries reported 3,808 deaths and 82,186 new cases on Tuesday.

Bolsonaro, a far-right populist and former army captain, downplayed the pandemic from the start, dismissing it as a "little flu" and casting doubt on the effectiveness of masks and vaccines, and has continued to rally against lockdown measures and authorities that implement them.

"Can't they understand that this policy of closing everything, of lockdown is wrong?" Bolsonaro asked a crowd of his supporters at the gates of the presidential palace in the capital Brasilia on Wednesday. The same afternoon, Brazil's Supreme Court authorised the opening of the Senate inquiry, known locally by its Portuguese acronym CPI, in a move welcomed by opposition senators.

"The performance of the government in tackling the pandemic was the worst it could have been," Humberto Costa, a former health minister and senator with the left-wing Worker's Party, told Al Jazeera.

"Bolsonaro is scared to death of the CPI ... of the denouncements that will come and what will be revealed ... of the possibility of impeachment and not getting re-elected next year."

Costa said the inquiry would investigate allegations that Bolsonaro sabotaged social distancing measures, targeted local authorities that tried to implement lockdowns, acted negligently in acquiring vaccines, as well as touted ineffective medicines such as chloroquine. Altogether, 11 senators and seven substitutes will form the committee who will call witnesses to testify.

One of the main focuses will be how hospitals in the Amazonian capital of Manaus came to run out of oxygen. Another will be former health minister General Eduardo Pazuello, who federal prosecutors on Wednesday filed a lawsuit against for omission during the oxygen crisis in Manaus.

Senators in the president's ruling coalition have urged that the inquiry not be used for "political" purposes. "We need to focus on bringing positive results to our country," Senator Nelsinho Trad, a Bolsonaro ally, told CNN Brazil Tuesday.

The inquiry could lead to the president's impeachment or even arrest, though analysts say those outcomes are highly unlikely, at least for now. That is partly because senators loyal to Bolsonaro have expanded the scope of the investigation to include Brazilian mayors and governors, which Rafael Cortez, a political scientist at Tendencias Consultancy in Sao Paulo, said could open the door to horse-trading before next year's elections.

The inquiry's expansion is widely seen as an attempt to overload – and therefore dilute – its eventual findings. But Cortez said the CPI could hurt Bolsonaro's popularity and his re-election chances next year, especially as large swaths of the electorate struggle with rising poverty, unemployment, food insecurity and hunger, as well as reductions to emergency COVID-19 cash payments.

"The most likely scenario here is that the government doesn't manage to recover its popularity," said Cortez.

Despite the pandemic and its consequences, the president still commands significant albeit shrinking support both within Congress and with the Brazilian electorate.

The latest opinion polls by Datafolha, taken in mid-March, suggest that 44 percent of those polled thought the Bolsonaro government was “bad or awful”, but that 30 percent thought it was “good or excellent.”

However, observers expect these numbers to get worse. “If the election was today there’s a strong chance he would lose,” said Cortez. Since Brazil’s Supreme Court quashed former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva’s corruption convictions, it is thought likely that the popular left-wing leader might face off against Bolsonaro in 2022. Polls suggest Lula would have a strong chance of winning.

Meanwhile, April is already the second-worst month in Brazil’s pandemic, with nearly 37,000 deaths recorded as of Tuesday, after more than 66,000 deaths in March. Recent research by the University of Washington predicted that 100,000 Brazilians would die of COVID-19 this month.

On Tuesday, a Brazilian bar association commission wrote in a report that Bolsonaro had founded a “republic of death” and committed crimes “of responsibility” and “against humanity” with his response to the COVID-19 crisis.

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