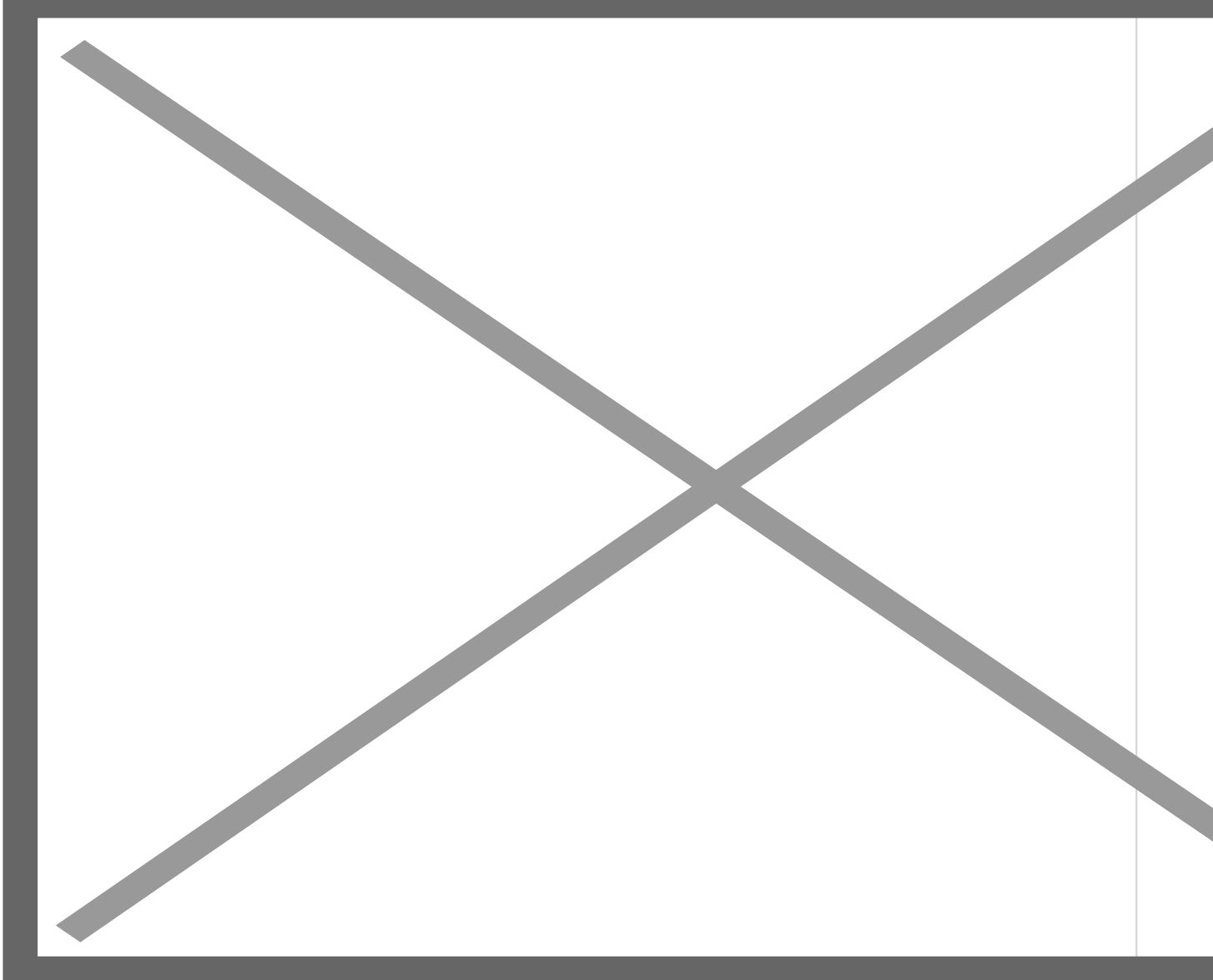


Brazil passes 500,000 COVID deaths as protesters rally against Bolsonaro

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Tens of thousands marched against Bolsonaro in Brazil on Saturday

Brasilia, June 20 (RHC)-- Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets across Brazil to protest against President Jair Bolsonaro's pandemic response as the country's COVID-19 death toll surpassed 500,000.

Protesters across the country blasted the administration for the high death toll and called for the removal of the president.

Brazil has registered 500,800 deaths from 17,883,750 confirmed COVID-19 cases, according to health ministry data on Saturday, the worst official death toll outside the United States. Over the past week, Brazil has averaged 2,000 deaths per day. Some 11 percent of Brazilians are fully vaccinated and 29 percent have received a first dose, health ministry data shows.

COVID-19 continues to devastate countries around the region with the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) reporting 1.1 million new cases of COVID-19 and 31,000 deaths in the Americas last week. PAHO noted upticks in six Mexican states, Belize, Guatemala, Panama and some places in the Caribbean.

PAHO warned that Colombia's COVID-19 situation is at its worst point yet, with intensive care unit beds filled in major cities. Some experts see the toll in Brazil climbing far higher.

"I think we are going to reach 700,000 or 800,000 deaths before we get to see the effects of vaccination," Gonzalo Vecina, former head of Brazilian health regulator Anvisa, told the news agency Reuters. "We are experiencing the arrival of these new variants and the Indian variant will send us for a loop," he said, predicting a near-term acceleration in fatalities.

Vecina criticized far-right President Jair Bolsonaro's handling of the pandemic, including the lack of a coordinated national response and his scepticism toward vaccines, lockdowns and mask-wearing requirements, which he has sought to loosen.

The government has faced fierce criticism for passing up earlier opportunities to buy vaccines. Pharmaceutical maker Pfizer said it got no response to early offers to sell vaccines to the government between August and November last year.

Protesters on Saturday criticised Bolsonaro for not acquiring vaccines fast enough and for questioning social distancing measures and mask-wearing. "We are protesting against the genocidal Bolsonaro government that did not buy vaccines and has done nothing to take care of its people in the last year," said 36-year-old Aline Rabelo, while protesting in the national mall in Brasilia.

Brazil's largest broadcaster Globo reported that by early afternoon, protests had been held in at least 44 cities in 20 states. Demonstrators held up signs demanding Bolsonaro be removed from office while chanting and beating drums.

A special Senate committee is probing the Bolsonaro administration's pandemic response, highlighting the government's delayed efforts to acquire vaccines while prioritising unproven treatments for COVID-19.



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