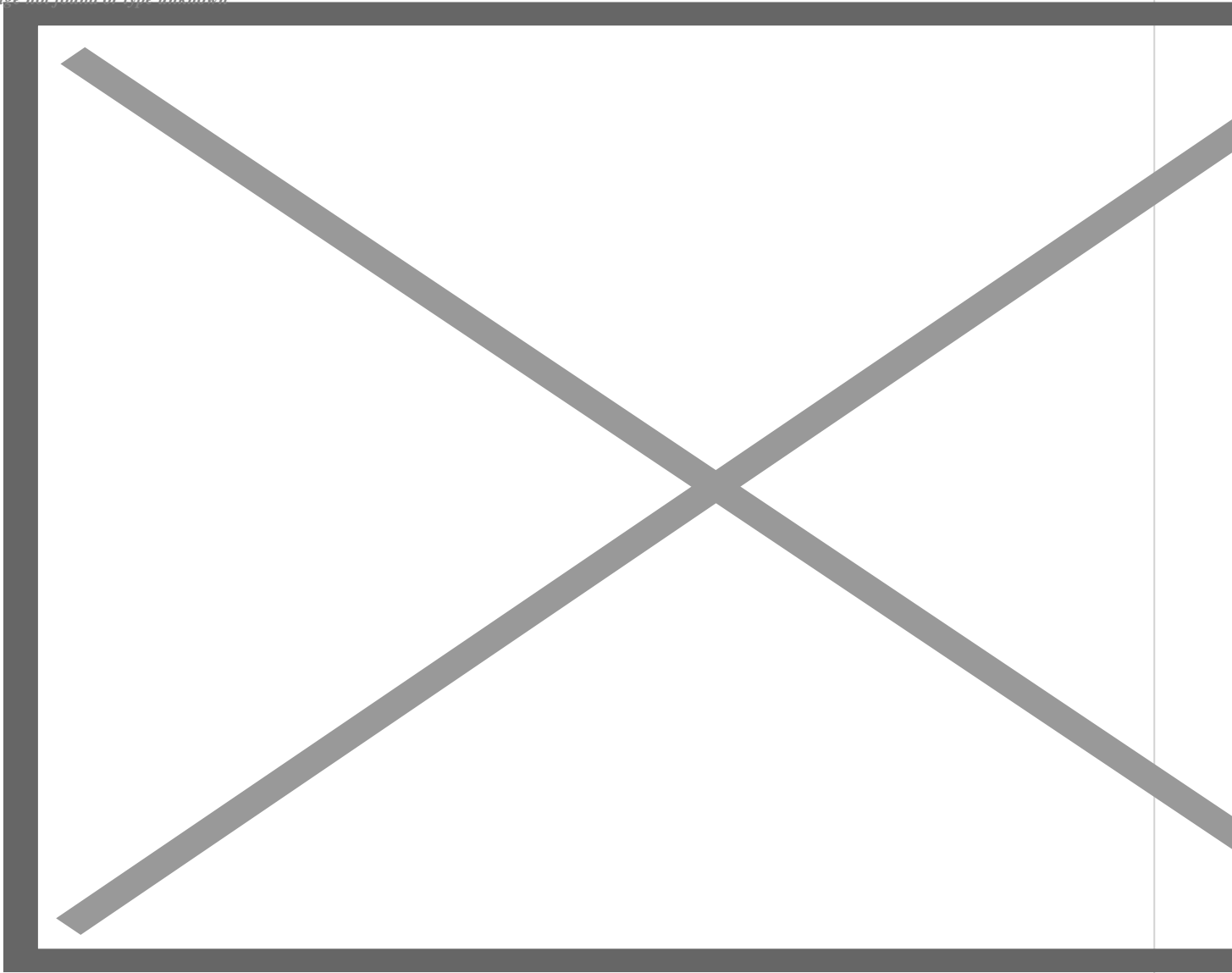


Brazilian senator files complaint against Bolsonaro over vaccines

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Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has faced mounting criticism for his government's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, which has ravaged Brazil [File: Adriano Machado/Reuters]

Brasilia, June 28 (RHC)-- An opposition senator in Brazil has filed a criminal complaint against far-right President Jair Bolsonaro with the country's Supreme Court, urging an investigation into alleged irregularities in COVID-19 vaccine purchases.

The complaint came after a Senate commission investigating the government's pandemic response uncovered explosive accusations last week that Bolsonaro knew about suspected corruption in Brazil's \$300 million deal for Indian-made vaccine Covaxin and failed to intervene.

In a video released by his office, Senator Randolfe Rodrigues said he had filed a request for the Supreme Court to probe the president "on account of the serious allegations" and because Bolsonaro "did not take any action after being notified of the existence of a giant corruption scheme in the Health Ministry." The president's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Bolsonaro, a COVID-19 sceptic who dismissed the virus as "a little flu" earlier in the pandemic, has faced mounting pressure for his government's handling of the crisis. A Brazilian Senate commission launched an investigation in April. But Bolsonaro has remained defiant, rejecting calls to impose nationwide restrictions such as curfews, even as coronavirus deaths surged across the country.

Brazil has recorded the second-highest number of fatalities in the world after the United States, as more than 513,000 people have died, according to a Johns Hopkins University tally.

The Bharat contract is being probed by federal prosecutors and lawmakers to see why the government struck a speedy agreement with an intermediary for the company after COVID-19 vaccine offers from Pfizer at a lower price were ignored.

Brazilian federal prosecutors have opened an investigation into a contract worth \$320m for 20 million doses of Bharat Biotech's vaccine. Prosecutors cited comparatively high prices, quick talks and pending regulatory approvals as red flags for the contract signed in February.

It remains to be seen if Rodrigues's request will be accepted by the Supreme Court. But the case risks damaging Bolsonaro politically at a time when his support is dwindling and polls place him far behind leftist ex-President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva heading into elections next year.

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