

Bolsonaro taps family friend as Brazil's federal police chief



Brasilia, April 29 (RHC)-- Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has named a family friend to head the Federal Police, days after the country's justice minister quit and accused the president of meddling in law enforcement.

The controversy over the appointment of Alexandre Ramagem and allegations by outgoing Justice Minister Sergio Moro of improper interference in the police force triggered talk of impeachment and a criminal investigation approved by the Supreme Court, as the country grapples with the coronavirus epidemic, which has now killed 5,017 people in Brazil, hundreds more than in China.

The government's official gazette confirmed the appointment of new federal police chief Ramagem, 48, who took charge of the president's security after Bolsonaro was stabbed on the campaign trail in 2018. The selection comes amid investigations into alleged wrongdoing by the president's sons.

Ramagem, who joined the federal police in 2005, has the fewest years of service of any officer tapped to lead the force. He has run the Brazilian Intelligence Agency since July.

Last Friday, Justice Minister Sergio Moro alleged in a stunning televised address that Bolsonaro had repeatedly said he wanted a "personal contact" in the top police job "from whom he could get information, intelligence reports."

Brazil's Supreme Court on Monday gave the green light for the top public prosecutor to investigate the allegations against Bolsonaro. Justice Celso de Mello gave the Federal Police 60 days to carry out the investigation requested by Brazil's chief public prosecutor Augusto Aras.

Mello's order effectively puts Bolsonaro's new appointee, Ramagem, in charge of the investigation.

Based on the results of the police investigation, the public prosecutor will decide whether to press charges against the president. An indictment would have to be approved by the lower house, also known as the Chamber of Deputies.

The Health Ministry reported that a record 474 people died from COVID-19 in the last 24 hours, bringing the death toll to 5,017. Confirmed cases have risen at 5,000 a day in the last 48 hours, to 71,866.

"So what? I'm sorry, but what do you want me to do?" Bolsonaro told reporters when asked about the record deaths. He promised to allow the Federal Police under the command of its new chief to have full autonomy from the government.

But earlier on Tuesday, the opposition Democratic Labor Party asked the Supreme Court to block Ramagem's nomination, alleging an abuse of power. The affair has sparked talk in Congress of impeachment, just four years after such proceedings toppled former President Dilma Rousseff.

However, a poll by Datafolha published on Monday evening showed Brazilians divided on impeachment, with 45 percent supporting the move and 48 percent against.

Crucially, Bolsonaro appears to be keeping core supporters, the poll showed, with 33 percent of those surveyed saying they thought he was doing a good or excellent job.

Still, the accusations from the popular "super minister" Moro, who locked up many of powerful politicians and businessmen as a judge, has dented Bolsonaro's corruption-fighting image, which was central to his 2018 campaign.

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