

Bolsonaro rallies the right amid coronavirus criticism



Brasilia, May 5 (RHC)-- Brazil's right-wing president Jair Bolsonaro attacked Congress and the courts in a speech to hundreds of supporters, as the country's known coronavirus cases rose to more than 100,000 underlining the former army captain's increasing isolation over his response to the pandemic.

Bolsonaro has drawn criticism from across the political spectrum for dismissing the threat of the virus in Brazil, which has registered 101,147 confirmed cases and 7,025 deaths, according to the most recent data from the Health Ministry.

On Sunday, dozens of public figures signed an open letter to the Brazilian government calling on officials to protect the nation's indigenous people, who often live in remote locations with limited access to healthcare.

At the same time, Bolsonaro faces the most serious political crisis of his mandate after his Justice Minister Sergio Moro quit last week and accused the president of firing the federal police chief in a bid to appoint a personal ally to the post and meddle in sensitive investigations. Brazil's Supreme Court blocked Bolsonaro's pick for a new chief on Wednesday, enraging the president.

Sergio Moro, among Brazil's most popular public figures due to his tough stance on corruption, presented testimony regarding possible obstruction of justice by Bolsonaro. Hours before, the president called Moro

"Judas" on Twitter, referring to the apostle who betrayed Jesus.

As Bolsonaro's relationship with legislators and the courts has cooled, he has become increasingly dependent on a cadre of military-linked advisers in his government. As in an April rally also attended by Bolsonaro, demonstrators called on Sunday for the closing of the Supreme Court and Congress and a return to authoritarian measures used during Brazil's 1964-1985 military government.

"We have the armed forces at the people's side: the side of order, democracy, liberty," Bolsonaro said in a speech broadcast live on Facebook. "Enough interference. We're not allowing any more interference. Our patience is over."

Bolsonaro did not call for a military takeover at the rally in Brasilia and such an occurrence is widely considered unlikely in Brazil, where Congress, the courts, the press and civil society wield significant power. But political leaders have called Bolsonaro's participation in anti-democratic rallies irresponsible, especially as he has spoken approvingly of the nation's former military dictatorship, which was responsible for hundreds of extrajudicial executions.

Bolsonaro's attendance also drew criticism as the nation is a significant coronavirus hot spot. Bolsonaro, who did not wear a mask on Sunday, has dismissed the coronavirus as a "little flu," saying the economic fallout of quarantining measures would be deadlier than the virus itself.

The open letter on Sunday, which warned that loggers and ranchers could introduce the virus to indigenous communities in a development tantamount to "genocide," was signed by celebrities ranging from US television personality Oprah Winfrey to Brazilian supermodel Gisele Bundchen.

The government has banned people from entering indigenous reserves during the pandemic. It has also cut down, however, on law enforcement against illegal loggers and miners in remote regions as a safety measure.

At the Sunday rally, at least three photographers were attacked by demonstrators, according to a witness quoted by the Reuters news agency -- an increasingly routine occurrence in Brazil, where Bolsonaro routinely calls the work of leading newspapers "fake news."

The Reuters witness saw one photographer from Sao Paulo newspaper O Estado de S. Paulo pulled off a ladder and repeatedly kicked in the ribs.

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