

Brazil says Amazon COVID-19 variant three times more contagious

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Brasilia, February 12 (RHC)-- A coronavirus variant identified in the Brazilian Amazon may be three times more contagious but early analysis suggests vaccines are still effective against it, the country's health minister said on Thursday, without providing evidence for the claims.

Under pressure as the variant hammers the jungle city of Manaus with a devastating second wave of infections, Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello sought to reassure legislators that the surge of recent months was unexpected but coming under control. He also told a Senate hearing that Brazil would vaccinate half its eligible population by June and the rest by the end of the year – an ambitious target as the country has barely guaranteed doses for half the population.

Brazil began immunisations with vaccines made by China's Sinovac Biotech and Britain's AstraZeneca about three weeks ago. Pazuello did not explain how their effectiveness against the Manaus variant was analysed. "Thank God, we had clear news from the analysis that the vaccines still have an effect against this variant," Pazuello said. "But it is more contagious. By our analysis, it is three time more contagious."

The Butantan Institute in Sao Paulo, which has partnered with Sinovac to test and produce the Chinese vaccine, said in a statement that it had begun studies regarding the Manaus variant but would not have a conclusion for two weeks.

The Fiocruz biomedical centre in Rio de Janeiro, which has paired up with AstraZeneca to fill and finish doses of its vaccine developed with Oxford University, said it is studying its efficacy against the Amazon variant, sent samples to Oxford and is awaiting results. Located deep in the Amazon rainforest, Manaus has been hit hard by a brutal second wave of cases that has stretched emergency services to breaking point.

The city's hospitals ran out of oxygen in January, prompting the federal government to fly in supplies from across the country in an attempt to save people from suffocating to death.

President Jair Bolsonaro has downplayed the deadly virus, even as he contracted the disease. His administration has also been accused of acting slowly in acquiring vaccines, thus delaying its vaccination rollout. The delays leave Brazil's 210 million residents vulnerable to one of the worst coronavirus outbreaks on the planet.

As of Thursday, Brazil has reported more 9.7 million coronavirus cases with more than 236,000 deaths from COVID-19 – second only to the United States, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. It has begun a vaccination campaign but so far only an estimated 0.5 percent of the population has received the shot.

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