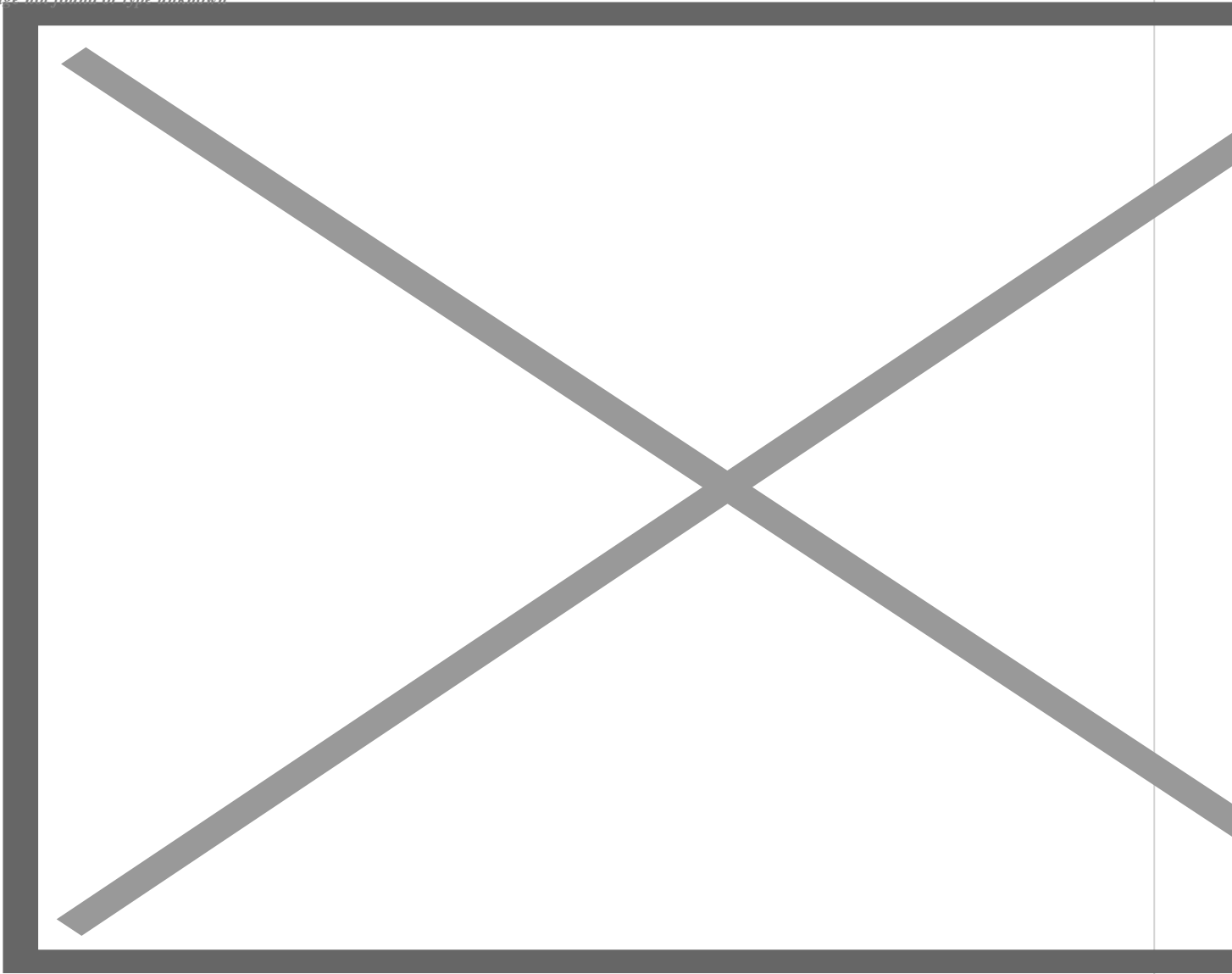


Protests erupt over Paraguay's handling of COVID-19

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Riot police clash with a demonstrator during a protest against President Mario Abdo Benitez's health policies and the shortage of COVID vaccines in Asuncion. (Photo: Cesar Olmedo/Reuters)

Asuncion, March 6 (RHC)-- Protesters have clashed with police in Paraguay's capital, as anger over the government's handling of the coronavirus crisis boiled onto the streets, with shops ransacked and cars set on fire.

Security forces fired rubber bullets and tear gas on hundreds of rioters who gathered around the Congress building in downtown Asuncion late on Friday, while protesters broke down security barriers, burned road barricades and threw stones at police.

The riots, which turned the capital's historic centre into a makeshift battlefield of fire, smoke and gunshots, broke out amid growing outrage as coronavirus infections hit record levels and hospitals verged on collapse throughout the South American nation.

Protesters rallied earlier outside the Congress building to demand the resignation of President Mario Abdo Benitez. On Thursday, the Senate adopted by 30 votes out of 45 a resolution calling for Mazzoleni to step down.

Health Minister Julio Mazzoleni, who has been under attack from lawmakers, including some from the ruling party, and by health worker unions, submitted his resignation, which he made public on Friday after a meeting with the president.

Abdo Benitez appointed Julio Borba, a vice minister, to take Mazzoleni's place. Borba told reporters he would begin tracking down medicine and supplies immediately.

The coronavirus epidemic is expanding in Paraguay and officials admit the threat is grave. "We are in a critical situation," said health ministry spokesman Hernan Martinez.

"Let's avoid crowds. It is the only thing that can save us from the collapse of healthcare." As of Friday, Paraguay had 165,811 cases and 3,278 deaths.

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