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Brasilia, March 18 (RHC)-- Brazil has reported a single-day record of 90,303 new cases of COVID-19, as the South American nation continues to grapple with mounting coronavirus infections and deaths. The health ministry said on Wednesday that 2,648 additional deaths were recorded over the previous 24-hour period, bringing the country's total to over 282,000 deaths – second only to the United States.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is facing mounting pressure to get the surging pandemic under control as public discontent over his handling of the crisis is growing. Earlier this week, the far-right leader

named a new health minister – the country’s fourth since the start of the pandemic last year.

Marcelo Queiroga, a cardiologist, is replacing Eduardo Pazuello, an army general who had been criticised for not having any medical experience.

Bolsonaro, a COVID-19 sceptic who has eschewed public health measures such as mask-wearing and social distancing, earlier this week said Brazil is entering a “more aggressive phase” in its fight against the virus.

That was echoed by Queiroga on Wednesday, who said the president had promised him “autonomy” on pandemic policy. “We plan to reduce the number of deaths with two main points: social distancing policies to reduce the spread of the virus, and expanding our hospitals’ capacity,” Queiroga said during a news conference.

Meanwhile, a new survey found that most Brazilians disapprove of how Bolsonaro has responded to the COVID-19 crisis. The Datafolha poll released late on Tuesday showed 54 percent of Brazilians view the president’s handling of the pandemic as bad or awful.

Lula has slammed his rival for the crisis, telling Brazilians to avoid gatherings and not to listen to Bolsonaro, whom he called an “imbecile.”

Brazil’s COVID-19 vaccine roll-out has also been plagued by delays, fuelling public anger.

On Wednesday, Bolsonaro said he was “happy” to see protests in Brazil against social distancing measures. Demonstrations have taken place in recent days after some local and regional authorities imposed lockdown orders to try to stem the spread of the virus.

“Logically, I was happy,” Bolsonaro said in remarks broadcast on social media. “They show that the people are alive ... we want our freedom, we want the world to respect our constitution.”

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