

Bolsonaro reshuffles cabinet under pressure over COVID crisis

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Brasilia, March 29 (RHC)-- Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has replaced six ministers in a sweeping cabinet reshuffle that comes as the far-right leader faces mounting pressure to account for his government's handling of a surging COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the changes, Carlos Alberto Franco França was named as new foreign minister and Walter Souza Braga Netto was confirmed as new defence minister, Bolsonaro's press office said in a statement on Monday evening. The announcement was made after earlier reports that Araújo, a loyal ally of Bolsonaro, and Azevedo e Silva had stepped down.

Bolsonaro, a COVID-19 sceptic who has rejected the need for public health measures to mitigate the spread of the virus, is under growing pressure to address the pandemic more seriously and slow a second

wave of infections that has pushed hospitals to the brink.

More than 312,000 people have died in Brazil from COVID-19, according to data collected by Johns Hopkins University, while the country has reported more than 12.5 million infections – second only to the United States.

Brazil's health ministry said on Monday 1,660 coronavirus-related deaths and 38,927 new cases had been reported in the past 24 hours, as experts warned this week that younger Brazilians were being particularly hard-hit by the pandemic's current wave.

The departure of Azevedo e Silva was a surprise, given there were no rumours of his exit or rumblings of discontent. The president has placed current and former military officials throughout all levels of his government.

“During this time, I preserved the Armed Forces as institutions of state,” Azevedo e Silva wrote in a ministry statement. “I leave in the certainty of a mission accomplished.”

Earlier this month, Bolsonaro replaced Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello, an active-duty general who had overseen most of the coronavirus response. He was widely blamed for a slow and patchy vaccine programme.

Brazil's foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment about Araújo's departure.

In recent days, Araújo irked senior lawmakers who had become increasingly vocal in calling for him to be replaced. They were angered by his longstanding criticism of top trade partner China.

The diplomat's esteem for former US President Donald Trump was also seen as an obstacle in persuading the Biden administration to free up supplies of US vaccine for Brazil.

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