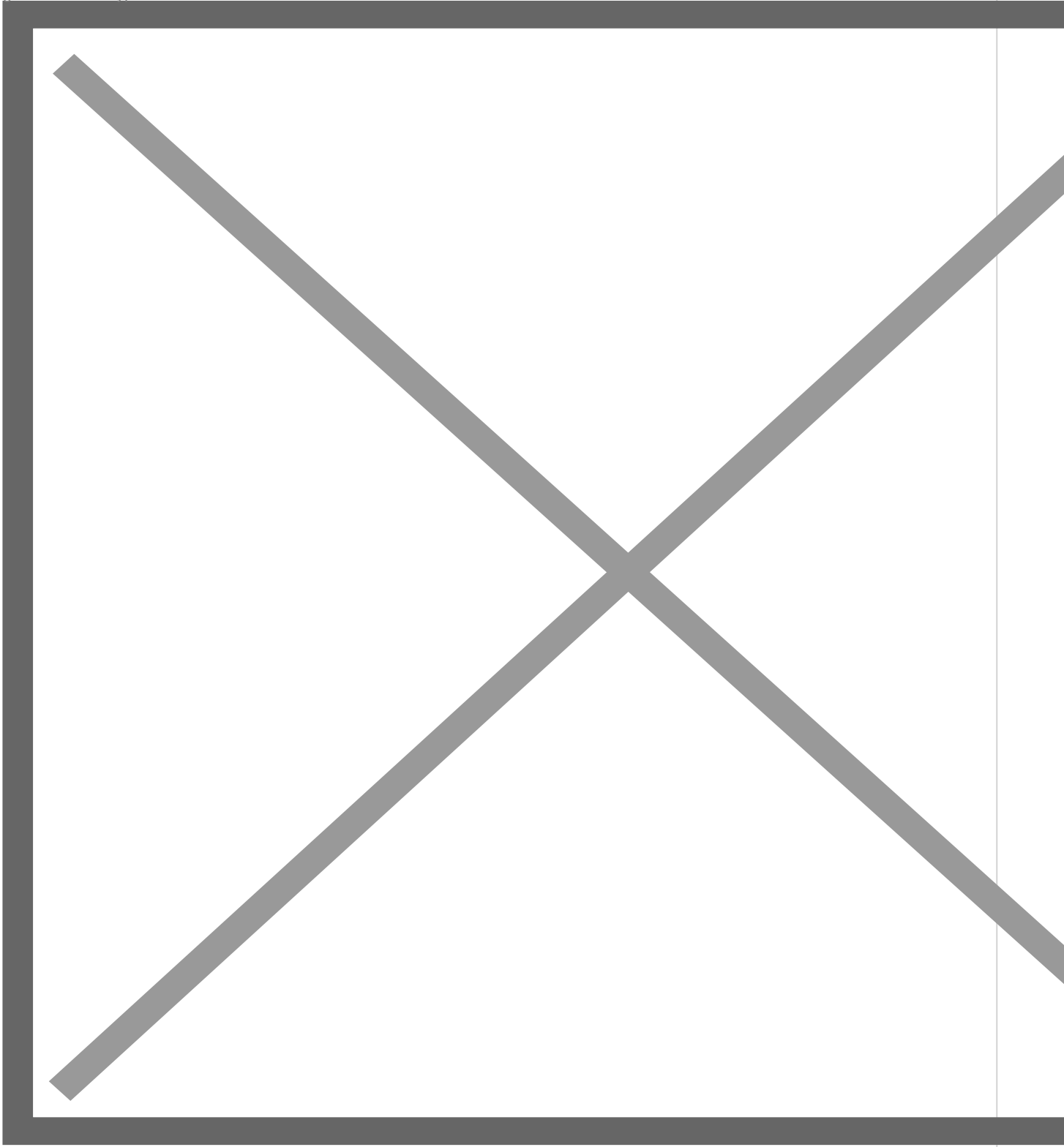


Millions go hungry amid Brazil COVID crisis

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Brazil: Land Of Hunger And Football

Sao Paulo, April 14 (RHC)-- As Brazil's COVID-19 crisis gets worse by the week with record-high death tolls, packed hospitals and climbing caseloads, another crisis is unfolding: hunger and food insecurity.

Experts point to high unemployment exacerbated by the coronavirus, cuts and reductions to social programmes and sharp price increases on basic food staples as some of the reasons behind the problem. "It's a tragedy that was totally foreseeable," said Renato Maluf, president of the Brazilian Food Sovereignty and Nutritional Security Research Network (PENSSAN Network) that coordinated the study, conducted in December when Brazilians were still receiving emergency coronavirus cash payments from the government. "Certainly things have gotten worse since then," Maluf said.

Brazil was taken off of the United Nation's world hunger map in 2014 after years of concerted effort to reduce hunger through successful social programmes and public policies.

The country's then-President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who now appears to be making a political comeback, famously said at his 2003 swearing-in ceremony that, "as long as there is a Brazilian brother or sister going hungry we will have reason to be ashamed".

But in 2015, recession and political crisis struck. Austerity measures were introduced and unemployment soared. Three years later, before presidential elections that far-right populist firebrand Jair Bolsonaro would go on to win, extreme poverty and hunger were already raising alarms.

"The situation has been getting worse in recent years," said Marcelo Neri, an economist at Brazil's Getulio Vargas Foundation. "Definitely food insecurity has grown in 2021." Alexandre Padilha, a congressman with the left-wing Workers' Party and a former health minister, said rising hunger and food insecurity was especially troubling during the COVID-19 pandemic as people pushed to find work or food were exposing themselves to the virus.

They could also be more vulnerable to contracting COVID-19 because their immune systems are weakened due to a lack of sustenance, Padilha said. "It's a tragic combination that reinforces the worst human tragedy in the history of Brazil," he told reporters. "It compromises future generations for our country."

Brazil is a major food exporter and Sao Paulo is South America's wealthiest city. But for citizens living in the city's impoverished periphery neighbourhoods like Jardim Keralux, eating three nutritious meals a day is increasingly an unaffordable luxury.

The situation is even worse in rural areas. "A poor person in the city can go out in the street and ask for food, a poor rural person can't," said Maluf at the PENSSAN Network.

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