

Brazilian Senate opens inquiry into Bolsonaro's COVID handling



Brasilia, April 28 (RHC)-- Brazil's Senate has opened its inquiry into President Jair Bolsonaro's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the South American country rapidly approaches the somber milestone of 400,000 coronavirus-related deaths.

The government of Bolsonaro, a far-right COVID-19 sceptic who has downplayed the virus and rebuffed efforts to enact public health restrictions, is facing widespread criticism for Brazil's high coronavirus death toll and infection rates.

More than 391,000 people have died in Brazil – the second highest death toll after the United States – while at least 14.3 million cases have been recorded to date, according to a Johns Hopkins University tally.

The parliamentary commission – known by its Portuguese acronym CPI – will investigate whether federal or state officials were criminally negligent or corrupt in their handling of the pandemic, as well as whether Bolsonaro sabotaged public health measures.

A catastrophe that struck the Amazonian city of Manaus, where hospitals ran out of oxygen and other much-needed supplies during a surge of infections earlier this year, will also be investigated. “The performance of the government in tackling the pandemic was the worst it could have been,” Humberto Costa, a former health minister and senator with the left-wing Worker’s Party, told Al Jazeera earlier this month about the probe.

Political analyst Andre Rehbein Sathler, of news site Congresso em Foco’s research unit, told the AFP news agency that the investigation “is going to create a lot of problems for the president.” “They don’t even really need an investigation. The government’s actions on the pandemic are there for all to see,” he said.

“Not just omissions, but actions. The administration went to the Supreme Court to try to block states’ social distancing measures, it refused to purchase vaccines, it minimised the pandemic.”

Bolsonaro has defended his government’s handling of the pandemic, saying public health curbs, such as lockdowns, would harm the economy. “We’re not going to accept this politics of stay home and shut everything down,” he told a crowd of supporters earlier this month, again refusing to impose a national lockdown.

In recent days, Bolsonaro suggested he could send the army out onto the streets if lockdown measures aimed at stemming the spread of COVID-19 lead to chaos. “That lockdown policy, of quarantine, is absurd. If we have problems ... we have a plan of how to act. I am the supreme head of the armed forces,” he said in an interview with TV Critica.

Observers have said the Senate inquiry could hurt Bolsonaro’s chances of re-election in polls scheduled for next year. The former army captain is widely expected to be challenged by left-wing former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who has slammed Bolsonaro’s handling of the pandemic and said: “Brazil will not withstand it if this man continues to govern in this way.”

The 11 Senate commissioners have the power to subpoena documents and compel witnesses to testify, and they can submit their findings to police or other authorities with the power to prosecute wrongdoing. The news website UOL reported on Sunday that an internal administration document anticipated 23 possible lines of investigation, including politicising the pandemic and negligence in purchasing vaccines.

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