

Brazil's Bolsonaro fined for breaking COVID public health rules

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A demonstrator carries a banner that reads 'Bolsonaro, it is your fault! Genocide' last month during a protest against Bolsonaro and his handling of the pandemic [File: Bruno Kelly/Reuters]

Brasilia, May 23 (RHC)-- Far-right Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, a COVID-19 sceptic who has refused to enact public health measures to stem the spread of the coronavirus, has been fined for failing

to adhere to health safety regulations at a public event in Maranhao state.

State Governor Flavio Dino said late on Friday that health authorities filed the case against Bolsonaro “for the promotion in Maranhao of gatherings with no sanitary safeguards.” “The law applies to everyone,” Dino tweeted, reminding the public that gatherings of more than 100 people are banned and that face masks are mandatory.

The president’s office has 15 days to appeal, after which the amount of the fine will be set. The office did not answer requests for comment from the AFP news agency. Bolsonaro has remained defiant in the face of widespread criticism over his government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, rejecting calls to impose a nationwide lockdown to try to stem the spread of the virus.

Over the weekend, Bolsonaro handed out rural property titles in Acailandia, about 500km (310 miles) from Sao Luis, capital of Maranhao state. During the event, the maskless president blasted Dino as a “chubby dictator” over the governor’s imposition of coronavirus restrictions.

More than 446,000 people have died due to the coronavirus in Brazil, according to Johns Hopkins University data – the second-highest total in the world after the United States. More than 15.9 million cases also have been reported to date, and public health experts have warned that another wave could be imminent.

The Brazilian Senate last month launched an investigation into how Bolsonaro and his government have responded to the crisis, heaping political pressure on the former army captain ahead of planned elections next year.

On Friday, the senator leading the inquiry alleged that Bolsonaro never wanted to buy COVID-19 vaccines, instead betting that herd immunity could beat the virus.

In an interview with the Reuters news agency, Senator Renan Calheiros said, “The president first denied the disease, called it a flu, and then argued against social isolation and lockdown. Then he played down the use of masks and encouraged crowds to gather.”

“Why is that? Because of herd immunity, the natural immunity ... you have to encourage crowds and the spread of the virus,” Calheiros said. “This is why he never wanted a vaccine.”

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