

Brazil's Bolsonaro dismisses call for COVID travel curbs

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Brasilia, November 26 (RHC)-- Brazil's health regulator has recommended curbs on travel from some African countries after the detection of a new COVID-19 variant, but President Jair Bolsonaro appeared to dismiss such measures.

Regulator Anvisa said on Friday its recommendation, which would need government approval to be implemented, was to immediately suspend flights from South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini, Namibia and Zimbabwe.

The UK and EU are already tightening border controls as researchers look into whether the new coronavirus mutation is vaccine-resistant.

Bolsonaro has been widely criticised for his management of the pandemic. He has railed against lockdowns, often refused to wear a mask in public and chose not to get vaccinated, while a Senate commission recently recommended the far-right president be indicted for his government's handling of the

crisis.

Brazil has the world's second-highest death toll from the virus, behind only the United States, at more than 613,000 fatalities, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

"Given the epidemiological impact that the new variant could have on the global situation, we recommend, as a preventive measure, the immediate suspension of all flights from South Africa, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia and Zimbabwe," Anvisa said in a statement.

The new variant, called B.1.1.529, has a spike protein that is dramatically different to the one in the original coronavirus that vaccines are based on, the UK Health Security Agency said, raising fears about how current vaccines will fare.

Brazil's regulatory agency also recommended "the temporary suspension of the authorization to stay in Brazil for foreign travelers who have passed through these countries in the last 14 days" because "the new variant appears to have a higher transmissibility."

Before Friday's Anvisa statement, Bolsonaro said it made little sense to close the borders. "What madness is this?" Bolsonaro told supporters when asked if travel would be restricted. "The virus doesn't come in if you close the airport. It is already here."

The president's comments come as devastation from the pandemic has receded in recent months.

More than 60 percent of Brazil's 213 million people are now fully vaccinated, and the average daily coronavirus death toll has fallen from more than 3,000 in April to around 200.

In Geneva, the World Health Organization warned on Friday against travel curbs in light of the new variant for now. With some semblance of normality returning to the beaches of Rio de Janeiro, prior to the discovery of the new variant, samba schools in the city had been kicking into gear for iconic carnival celebrations which are set to begin in February after being cancelled last year.

The schools want 2022's comeback carnival to be the biggest since 1919, the year Rio residents joyfully re-embraced life after the devastation of another pandemic, the Spanish flu. That carnival has gone down in history as one of the all-time legendary parties.

At "Samba City," the huge port-district yard where each school has a hangar to prepare, carpenters, welders and costume designers are working full-steam. The reigning champions of Rio's carnival parade competition, the Viradouro samba school, even chose the 1919 carnival as the theme of their comeback parade.

At a recent rehearsal, school members hugged joyfully on the dance floor and belted out the music, mostly without face masks. As the school's "drum-corps queen" shimmied in a gold-fringed miniskirt, the veteran head of the drummers, Moacyr da Silva Pinto, led some 50 percussionists through a booming rehearsal, a loud whistle around his neck.

"We're going to have the greatest carnival since 1919," said Pinto, a spry 65-year-old. "In Rio de Janeiro, samba is enmeshed in our lives, just like football and the beach." Attendance at the rehearsal, however, was restricted because of COVID-19.



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