

Brazil confirms first coronavirus death

March 17 2020

Brazil confirmed its first COVID-19 death Tuesday, as Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro declared a state of emergency over the virus outbreak—though President Jair Bolsonaro condemned what he called "hysteria" over the escalating crisis.

The South American country's first victim was a 62-year-old man with underlying [health conditions](#) who died Monday in Sao Paulo, authorities said.

He was diabetic and had [high blood pressure](#), TV network Globo News reported.

"Unfortunately, this shows how severe this pandemic is, despite what some would like to believe," Sao Paulo mayor Bruno Covas told CBN radio.

That will likely be taken as a jab at Bolsonaro, who criticized how [local governments](#) are reacting to the pandemic, after the city of Sao Paulo and state of Rio de Janeiro declared states of emergency over the virus.

"People are acting like it's the end of the world," the far-right president said in an interview with Radio Tupi.

"Some governors are taking measures that are really going to hurt our economy.... It's not like having groups of people here and there is the problem. What we need to do is reduce the hysteria."

The measures in Rio included closing the iconic Christ the Redeemer statue and the cable car to Sugarloaf Mountain, two of the city's most famous attractions.

Sao Paulo eased regulations on government purchases of all materials linked to containing the virus—including hand sanitizer, now mandatory on public transportation.

Rio ordered restaurants to reduce the number of tables by 70 percent to increase distance between patrons, closed stores in shopping malls and halved the number of [public transport](#) vehicles in circulation, calling on people to remain home when possible.

On Friday, the state had already closed schools, theaters and cinemas for at least 15 days.

Rio Governor Wilson Witzel has also ordered people off the city's beaches, deploying firefighters with loudspeakers to encourage them to go home.

Bolsonaro under fire

Brazil—the biggest country in Latin America, with 210 million people—has confirmed 234 coronavirus cases, concentrated in Sao Paulo and Rio.

Health officials are working to convince the population to take the threat seriously, but some Brazilians remain skeptical—not least Bolsonaro.

The president has drawn criticism for shaking hands and taking selfies with supporters at a rally Sunday, even though his own health ministry had recommended he remain in isolation for two weeks after being exposed to several officials who tested positive for COVID-19.

Bolsonaro tested negative for the virus last week, but is due to take another test to confirm.

He said in his radio interview that he would hold a "small party" to celebrate his 65th birthday Saturday, even though some health experts have recommended against such gatherings.

"Life goes on," he said.

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Citation: Brazil confirms first coronavirus death (2020, March 17) retrieved 3 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-brazil-coronavirus-death.html>

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