

Colombia calls emergency, South American football off as virus tightens grip

March 18 2020

Colombia and Bolivia both declared states of emergency and Brazil recorded its first coronavirus death as the global pandemic began to grip South America as tightly as other devastated regions.

Although COVID-19 was initially slower to take hold in Latin America than other parts of the world, Brazil, Chile and Peru are now reporting hundreds of cases as [daily life](#) in towns and cities halts.

"With these exceptional conditions that are facing the country... we have made this decision to declare the [state of emergency](#)," Colombian President Ivan Duque said, asking citizens older than 70 to remain indoors.

Bolivia's presidential office announced a "state of health emergency" Tuesday, imposing a 12-hour overnight curfew until March 31—and adding borders would be closed to foreigners within two days and all [international flights](#) grounded in 72 hours.

Similarly, Dominican Republic President Danilo Medina said the country would close its borders and suspend international air travel for 15 days from Thursday.

Football off

The continent's football governing body CONMEBOL said the month-

long 2020 Copa America would be delayed until 2021, shortly after UEFA announced the same decision for the European Championships.

"It's an extraordinary measure due to an unexpected situation, and therefore responds to the fundamental need to avoid an exponential evolution of the virus," the organisation said of the decision to delay the June 12 kick-off.

The tournament—set to be played in Argentina and Colombia—is now scheduled to run from June 11—July 11, 2021.

The championships were the latest in a string of major sporting events to be halted or postponed over the pandemic, which has killed more than 7,800 people and infected almost 200,000 worldwide.

Shortly after the postponement of the Copa America, Argentina's league also suspended play, meaning all major football competitions in South America have been stopped.

Costa Rica also suspended its football championship and announced it would shut national parks to visitors from March 23 to April 13.

And Mexican football side Atletico San Luis said Tuesday its president, Alberto Marrero, had been diagnosed with COVID-19—taking the country's toll to 93.

'Hysteria'

Away from the sporting arena, Chile was studying the possibility of pushing back its April 26 referendum on changing the dictatorship-era constitution, and upcoming elections in Bolivia on May 3 could be called into question.

Brazil confirmed its first COVID-19 death as Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro declared a state of emergency.

Yet President Jair Bolsonaro continued to buck the global trend towards increased vigilance, condemning the "hysteria" over the pandemic.

Brazil—the largest country in Latin America, with 210 million people—has confirmed more than 300 [coronavirus](#) infections concentrated in Sao Paulo and Rio, including its first fatal case, a 62-year-old man who had underlying health problems.

Bolsonaro himself tested negative for the virus for the second time Tuesday, the 64-year-old president announced on Twitter, after attending a gathering in the US last week that has so far seen 13 positive cases among its attendees.

Despite Brazil's health minister recommending the president remain in isolation until a third test, the far-right leader has continued to meet with supporters—even as Sao Paulo's mayor said the nation's latest death "shows how severe this pandemic is, despite what some would like to believe."

Rio closed two of its most popular attractions: the Christ the Redeemer statue and the Sugarloaf Mountain cable car.

In Argentina, which has registered two COVID-19 deaths, the government has suspended domestic flights, long-haul bus trips and trains for five days while neighboring Bolivia shuts its borders to foreigners from Thursday.

'Health comes first'

In Chile, different political factions and medical authorities were

studying the possibility of suspending April's referendum.

The government of right-wing President Sebastian Pinera agreed to hold the April vote on changing the three-decade-old constitution following months of street protests against inequality.

Heraldo Munoz, the [president](#) of the opposition Party for Democracy, said: "The people's health comes first."

Workers in several Santiago shopping malls held protests demanding they be closed over fears staff are being exposed to coronavirus by shoppers.

"If it is supposed to be something so extreme, why don't they close the mall?" storeworker Ingrid Vargas told AFP.

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