

Brazil virus deaths surge as pandemic bites in Latin America

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Infections in Brazil, already the third-highest globally, are climbing by the thousands, with the outbreak in the world's sixth-largest country expected to accelerate and not peak until early June

Brazil recorded its highest number of coronavirus deaths in a day as Latin America began to feel the full force of the pandemic, while the

World Health Organization agreed to investigate its response to the crisis.

With infections rapidly approaching five million, deaths topping 320,000 and the global economy devastated, there are fears that the worst is yet to come for the poorer parts of the world as they desperately try to contain the spread of the virus.

There was an alarming surge on Tuesday in Brazil as daily COVID-19 deaths crossed 1,000 for the first time, but far-right President Jair Bolsonaro remains bitterly opposed to lockdowns, having described them as unnecessary over a "little flu".

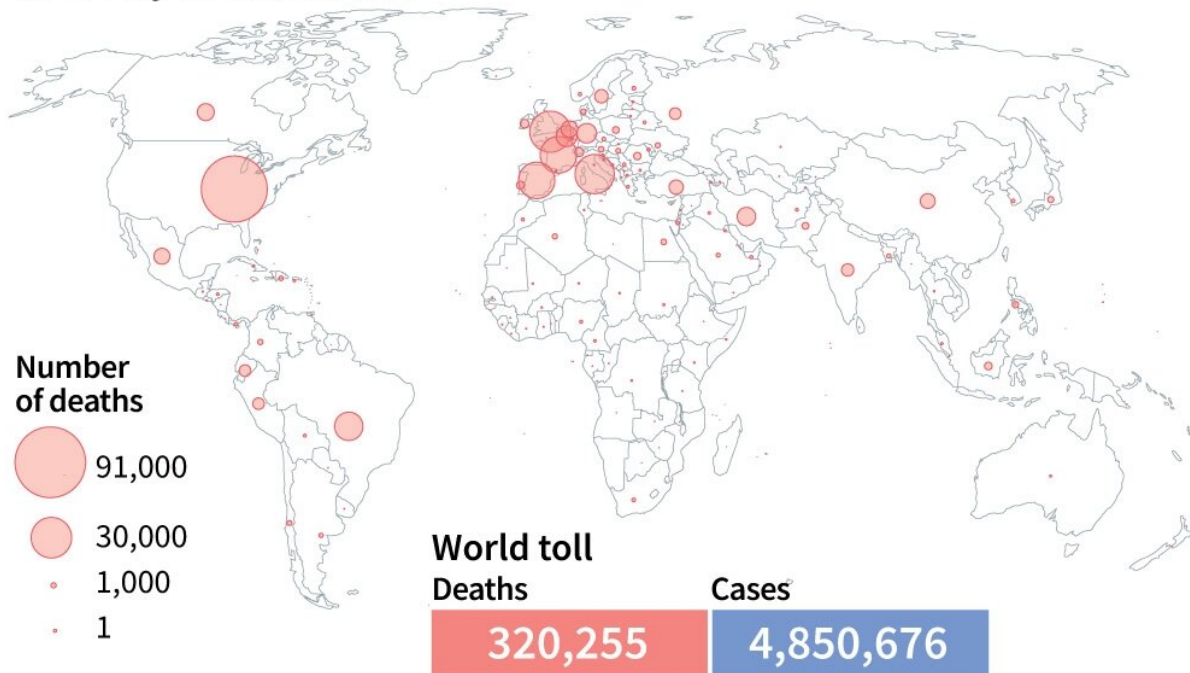
"Our country is going from bad to worse, it is getting worse," said retiree Gilberto Ferreira in Rio de Janeiro. "We have an inefficient government, and the people also do not obey the rules of the pandemic."

Infections in Brazil—already the third-highest globally—were climbing by the thousands, with the outbreak in the world's sixth-largest country expected to accelerate until early June.

The coronavirus surge in Latin America has forced some areas to suspend their plans to loosen restrictions, with Argentina's second city Cordoba rolling back plans to ease a lockdown because of a spike in infections.

Spread of the coronavirus

As of May 19 at 1900 GMT



Source: AFP count based on official tolls

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World map showing official number of coronavirus deaths per country, as of May 19 at 1900 GMT

There have been warnings about the impact of the pandemic on the least privileged communities, and World Bank chief David Malpass said Tuesday that up to 60 million people could be "pushed into extreme poverty".

In a worrying illustration of the mounting economic pressure, Chile—which is also suffering from a sharp rise in cases—deployed soldiers on the outskirts of its locked-down capital Santiago after clashes with protesters angry about food shortages and job losses.

"They don't have jobs, they are locked up in their house, they can't go out to look for work," said Jorge, an unemployed carpenter. "They are forcing the Chilean, the worker, to go out and steal."

On the other side of the world, authorities were scrambling to move people to safety while also trying to prevent the spread of the coronavirus as the fiercest cyclone in decades in the Bay of Bengal bore down on millions of people in eastern India and Bangladesh.



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'Permanent damage'

The grim numbers from Latin America came as the World Health Organization agreed to launch an independent investigation into its handling of the outbreak after scathing attacks from the United States, which is locked in a feud with Beijing over the pandemic.

President Donald Trump has threatened to permanently cut US funding to the WHO, accusing the UN body of being a "puppet of China" and helping Beijing cover up the initial outbreak.

China has furiously denied the allegation, saying the US is making such claims to "shirk responsibility and bargain over its international obligations to the WHO".

Russia has denounced Trump's threat, and the European Union has also backed the WHO, saying it was "not the time for finger pointing".

The row has threatened efforts to coordinate a global response to the pandemic, but the American president has dug in and continued to target China and the WHO as he faces intense domestic pressure to find a way out of the crisis.

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