

New infections show virus accelerating across Latin America

May 22 2020, by David Biller and Christopher Sherman



A nurse talks to a COVID-19 patient at the Dr. Ernesto Che Guevara hospital, that exclusively treats new coronavirus cases, in Marica, Brazil, Thursday, May 21, 2020. (AP Photo/Leo Correa)

The coronavirus pandemic accelerated across Latin America on Friday, bringing a surge of new infections and deaths, even as curves flattened

and reopening was underway in much of Europe, Asia and the United States.

The region's two largest nations—Mexico and Brazil—reported record counts of new cases and deaths almost daily this week, fueling criticism of their presidents, who have slow-walked shutdowns in attempts to limit economic damage.

Brazil reported more than 20,000 deaths and 300,000 confirmed cases, making it the third worst-hit country in the world by official counts. Experts consider both numbers undercounts due to the widespread lack of testing.

The virus "does not forgive. It does not choose race or if you are rich or poor, black or white. It's a cruel disease," Bruno Almeida de Mello, a 24-year-old Uber driver, said at his 66-year-old grandmother's burial in Rio de Janeiro.

Infections rose and intensive-care units were also swamped in Peru, Chile and Ecuador, countries lauded for imposing early and aggressive business shutdowns and quarantines. Many experts said the rising death toll across Latin America showed the limits of government action in a region where millions labor in informal jobs and many police forces are weak or corrupt and unable to enforce restrictions.



A woman holds a child and waits with other migrant workers outside a railway station hoping to be able to travel to their home states, in Jammu, India, Friday, May 22, 2020. India's lockdown was imposed on March 25 and has been extended several times. On May 4, India eased lockdown rules and allowed migrant workers to travel back to their homes, a decision that has resulted in millions of people being on the move for the last two weeks. (AP Photo/Channi Anand)

Many governments—even those where the virus is still on the rise—say they must shift their focus to saving jobs that are vanishing as quickly as the disease can spread. In the United States and China, the world's two largest economies, unemployment is soaring.

The Federal Reserve chairman has estimated that as many as 1 in 4

Americans could be jobless, while in China analysts estimate around a third of the urban workforce is unemployed.

Meanwhile, the virus is roaring through countries ill-equipped to handle the pandemic, which many scientists fear will seed the embers of a second global wave of infections.

India saw its biggest single-day spike since the pandemic began, and Pakistan and Russia recorded their highest death tolls. Most new Indian cases are in Bihar, where thousands returned home from jobs in the cities. For over a month, some walked among crowds for hundreds of miles.



Circles designed to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus by encouraging social distancing line San Francisco's Dolores Park, Thursday, May 21, 2020.

(AP Photo/Noah Berger)

Also in Russia, state news agencies reported that the authoritarian leader of the southern region of Chechnya was taken to a Moscow hospital with suspected COVID-19 symptoms. Ramzan Kadyrov, 43, has run predominantly Muslim Chechnya with an iron fist since 2007. The Kremlin has relied on him to keep the North Caucasus region stable after two devastating separatist wars.

Back in Brazil, Vandelma Rosa had all the virus' symptoms, but her death certificate reads "suspected of COVID-19," according to her grandson, because her hospital lacked tests to confirm. That means her passing did not figure into the death toll, which marked its biggest single-day increase Thursday: 1,181.

President Jair Bolsonaro has scoffed at the seriousness of the virus and actively campaigned against state governors' attempts to impose limits on citizens' movements and commerce.



Palestinian Hamas police stand guard at the entrance of a mosque as worshipers attend the last Friday noon Prayer of the holy month of Ramadan, in Gaza City, Friday, May. 22, 2020. After nearly two months of closure due to the coronavirus, Gaza's Hamas rulers decided to partially reopen mosques for the Friday noon prayer. (AP Photo/Khalil Hamra)

Bolsonaro fired his first health minister for siding against him in backing governors' stay-at-home recommendations and restrictions on activity. His second minister resigned about a month later after openly disagreeing with Bolsonaro about chloroquine, the predecessor of the anti-malarial often touted by U.S. President Donald Trump as a viable coronavirus treatment.

"In Rio de Janeiro, you see people going out normally, without a mask, in some neighborhoods. They aren't believing in this disease. And it's sad that in other countries people believe, but not here," de Mello said. "You need to lose someone in your family to be able to believe."

On Thursday, opposition lawmakers and other detractors protested in front of Congress in the capital, Brasilia. They called for Bolsonaro's impeachment, alleging criminal mishandling of virus response. Two of them displayed a Brazilian flag, defaced with hundreds of tiny black crosses to represent the dead.



An elderly couple wearing face masks and protective gloves to protect against coronavirus walk in St. Petersburg, Russia, Thursday, May 21, 2020. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador downplayed the threat the virus posed for weeks as he continued to travel the country after Mexico's first confirmed case. He let his health advisers take the lead on the crisis, but continued insisting that Mexico was different, that its strong family bonds and work ethic would pull it through.

Mexico passed 6,000 confirmed deaths on Wednesday. The country has recently reported more than 400 deaths a day, and new infections still have not peaked. Many deaths categorized as "atypical pneumonia" are suspected of being COVID-19 but not included in the official count. The true count may be several times higher.

Armando Sepulveda, manager of San Cristobal Mauseleum in the massive Mexico City suburb of Ecatepec, said his burial and cremation business has doubled in recent weeks.



Workers wearing protective gear carry the plastic-wrapped coffin of a person who died from COVID-19 into the crematorium at San Cristobal Mausoleums in Ecatepec, Mexico State, part of the Mexico City metropolitan area, Thursday, May 21, 2020. (AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell)

"The crematoriums are saturated," Sepulveda said Thursday. "All of the ovens don't have that capacity." Families scour the city looking for funeral services that can handle their dead "in desperation," because the hospitals cannot hold the dead for long, he said.

The Mexican government has shifted its attention to reactivating the economy.

Mining, construction and parts of the North American automotive supply chain were allowed to resume operations this week, but analysts predict a massive economic contraction in an economy that had already entered a technical recession before the pandemic.

The pandemic reaches from Latin America's mega-cities deep into the Amazon jungle.

The Colombian town of Leticia, which lies along the Amazon River at the border of Brazil and Peru, has nearly 1,300 cases. Residents are reeling from both the illness and a sudden loss of income, much of which came from tourism. Families have begun placing red cloth flags outside humble homes with tin roofs to show they are going hungry.



Medical workers move new coronavirus patient Rosane Pacheco to be treated at the Dr. Ernesto Che Guevara hospital in Marica, Brazil, Thursday, May 21, 2020. (AP Photo/Leo Correa)

Authorities in Colombia have pointed a finger at Brazil to explain the sudden rise in infections there, and President Iván Duque has imposed strict measures aimed at keeping cases out, including militarizing the border. But with many informal crossing points, it is nearly impossible to completely seal Colombia off.

In Chile, more than 90% of intensive care beds were full last week in the capital, Santiago, where the main cemetery dug 1,000 emergency graves to prepare for a wave of deaths despite a strict, early quarantine. Ecuador's government declared a 2 p.m.-5 a.m. curfew in March, among

other measures, but cases have swamped medical and mortuary services in the city of Guayaquil and, now, in the capital, Quito.

Hundreds of people can be seen violating the curfew daily in Ecuadorian cities, many selling goods on the streets to earn enough to buy food.



A picture of a student is seen on a tablet that is placed on a robot during an event they called "cyber-graduation" at a school at Taguig in Manila, Philippines, Friday, May 22, 2020. Robots were used to represent some 179 highschool students during an online graduation ceremony that was beamed live on Facebook to avoid mass gatherings as the school's measure to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus. (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)



A couple wearing masks and gloves to protect themselves from the new coronavirus mourn during the burial of their loved one at the newly constructed Valle de Chalco Municipal Cemetery, built to accommodate the rise in deaths amid the new coronavirus pandemic, on the outskirts of Mexico City, Thursday, May 21, 2020. (AP Photo/Marco Ugarte)



Cloth venders prepare to open their shops amid fears of the new coronavirus outbreak at a market in Jakarta, Indonesia Friday, May 22, 2020. (AP Photo/Achmad Ibrahim)



A woman takes a photo at the outdoor exhibition area after the reopening of the exhibition 'Karl Lagerfeld Photography. The retrospective.' in the Moritzburg Art Museum in Halle, Germany, Friday, May 22, 2020. The exhibition brings together more than 400 photographs of the German creative director, fashion designer, artist, photographer, and caricaturist who lived in Paris and died last year. (AP Photo/Jens Meyer)



A volunteer sprays disinfectant on passengers traveling to their villages to celebrate the upcoming Eid al-Fitr holiday that marks the end of the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan after the government relaxed a weeks-long lockdown that was enforced to help curb the spread of the coronavirus, in Lahore, Pakistan, Friday May 22, 2020. (AP Photo/K.M. Chaudhry)



A woman wearing a face shield walks along the road in Clifton, Cape Town, South Africa, Friday, May 22, 2020. Cape Town has become the center of the COVID-19 outbreak in South Africa and one of Africa's hot spots. The province containing Johannesburg, South Africa's largest city, and the capital, Pretoria, had been expected to be the country's epicenter with its population density and poverty levels but Cape Town defied predictions with high levels of community transmission. (AP Photo/Nardus Engelbrecht)



A staff member wearing a face shield and mask waits for customers at a coffee shop at Kempegowda International Airport in Bengaluru, India, Friday, May 22, 2020. India saw its biggest single-day spike since the pandemic began. The nationwide surge in cases comes ahead of the re-opening of domestic flights from Monday. (AP Photo/Aijaz Rahi)



A worker wears protective gear as he walks outside the crematorium at San Cristobal Mausoleums in Ecatepec, Mexico State, part of the Mexico City metropolitan area, Thursday, May 21, 2020. When handling cases of confirmed or suspected COVID-19, crematorium workers wear protective suits, full-face respirators and gloves, and maintain rigid disinfection protocols. (AP Photo/Rebecca Blackwell)

Other rule-breakers aren't needy. A doctor treating coronavirus in a hospital in northern Quito said he had treated members of a family who threw a Mother's Day barbeque despite the restrictions. The family's mother and her brother died of coronavirus, and seven relatives are hospitalized. The doctor spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the press.

Peru has 2.5 intensive-care beds per 100,000 people, one quarter of the global standard. With almost 109,000 confirmed cases and more than 3,100 dead as of Thursday night, Peruvian media showed images of patients slumped in wheelchairs receiving oxygen. Doctors say most patients are shopkeepers, taxi drivers or street vendors.

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Citation: New infections show virus accelerating across Latin America (2020, May 22) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-infections-virus-latin-america.html>

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