

Brazil's pandemic deaths top 200,000 amid a return to fun

January 8 2021, by Mauricio Savarese and Diane Jeantet



Health workers remove the body of a COVID-19 victim from a container, being used as a makeshift morgue, to turn over to a family outside the Joao Lucio public Hospital in Manaus, Amazonas state, Brazil, Monday, Jan. 4, 2021. (AP Photo/Edmar Barros)

The night before New Year's Eve in Rio de Janeiro, thousands of

revelers clad in their bathing suits crowded onto the iconic Ipanema beach to have some seaside drinks. It was one of many open-air parties occurring along Brazil's vast coastline since the summer heat set in, and as the COVID-19 death toll climbed higher.

"It was so packed, you couldn't set foot on the beach," said a maintenance worker at a luxury apartment building across the street. "And it wasn't just at night; the beach was packed during the day, too. And no one wears a mask!" he added, insisting on not being quoted by name out of worry the building's owner would punish him for speaking to a reporter.

The explosion of celebrations came just ahead of a pandemic milestone: Brazil passed 200,000 deaths Thursday, rising 1,524 in the previous 24 hours to a total of 200,498 for the pandemic, according to data released by Brazil's health ministry. It has the world's second highest death toll, behind the United States, according to Johns Hopkins University's database.

Dozens of protesters gathered outside Brazil's presidential palace on Friday with a banner blaming President Jair Bolsonaro for the grim landmark. They also carried signs urging congress to remove him from office.

Many Brazilians have been straining against quarantine for months, going to bars or small gatherings with friends, but massive blowouts had been few and far between since the pandemic began. Festivities kicked off after the Southern Hemisphere's summer started on Dec. 21.



Protesters shout slogans "Vaccine now" and hold the Portuguese message "Over 200,000 deaths. It's your fault, Bolsonaro," referring to Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and the COVID-29 pandemic, outside the presidential palace in Brasilia, Brazil, Friday, Jan. 8, 2021, the day after Brazil passed 200,000 pandemic deaths. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)

While many countries imposed new restrictions to limit the spread of the virus in mid-December, the Bolsonaro administration gave its blessing for holiday fun in the sun. Tourism Minister Gilson Machado told radio station Jovem Pan that gatherings of up to 300 people were perfectly acceptable. The decision to impose restrictions is the prerogative of local governments; some that did so saw their rules ignored.

A prominent YouTuber organized a party near a river beach for hundreds of people in Alagoas state, in the country's northeast region.

Days later, local media reported that 47 people, among unmasked guests and staffers contracted COVID-19. At least two were admitted to intensive-care units.

A five-day New Year's bash drew 150 people near the property owned by soccer star Neymar outside Rio, although he denied any association with the VIP event.



Relatives attend the burial of 71-year-old Jose Abelardo Bezerra, who died from COVID-19 related complications, at the Inhauma cemetery in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Thursday, Jan. 7, 2021. (AP Photo/Bruna Prado)

Outside Sao Paulo, Bolsonaro kicked off 2021 by jumping off a boat

and swimming towards a throng of unmasked, cheering supporters.

And cops in the city of Bertioga on Sao Paulo's coast used tear gas to disperse a celebration in the early hours New Year's Day.

"Right before the parties, the situation was already getting bad. But this week or next, it will get even worse," Domingos Alves, an adjunct professor of social medicine at the University of Sao Paulo, told The Associated Press this week.

Alves, who leads a team of researchers tracking COVID-19 data, warned that several states' daily confirmed cases have already surpassed the numbers seen during Brazil's peak in July.

Intensive-care units in many cities are once again slammed with COVID-19 patients. The mayor of Amazonas state's capital Manaus—which one local study speculated may have reached herd immunity after its brutal first wave—declared a 180-day state of emergency Tuesday and suspended all permits for events. State authorities prohibited all nonessential activities for 15 days in most of the city



Cemetery workers carry the remains of 89-year-old Abilio Ribeiro, who died of the new coronavirus, to bury at the Nossa Senhora Aparecida cemetery in Manaus, Amazonas state, Brazil, Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2021. Manaus declared on Jan. 5 a 180-day state of emergency due to a surge of new cases of coronavirus. (AP Photo/Edmar Barros)

The city of 2.2 million has recorded 3,550 deaths since the start of the pandemic, and the number of COVID-19 burials has surged. Outside at least one graveyard, cars lined up filled with people waiting to bury their loved ones.

Vanda Ortega, a volunteer nurse in Manaus' Community of Indigenous Nations, told the AP the city had adopted a hands-off approach toward the virus, first during November local elections with large rallies and

long lines of voters.

"Then we had the holiday season, with a lot of secret parties," said Ortega, who belongs to the Witoto ethnicity. "We live in an area where rich people have cabins. They have parties every week."

Many mayors on Sao Paulo's shore ignored holiday restrictions their governor imposed. In at least 12 cities, mayors kept stores, hotels and beaches open to tourists.



Relatives attend the burial of 71-year-old Jose Abelardo Bezerra, who died from COVID-19 related complications, at the Inhauma cemetery in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Thursday, Jan. 7, 2021. (AP Photo/Bruna Prado)

Images of traffic jams and packed beaches, with crowds largely unmasked, were so jarring that European Union commissioner Paolo Gentiloni expressed his disbelief on Twitter, saying "I saw shameful images from Brazil."

Bolsonaro, who despite becoming ill from the virus himself, has consistently argued that the country faces a greater risk from the economic damage of lockdowns than from the pandemic. He signaled with his New Year's swim that he will continue to ignore protective measures observed in most countries.

"I dived in with a mask on so I wouldn't catch COVID from the little fish," he joked a few days later outside the presidential palace.

After Brazil surpassed the 200,000 deaths mark, Bolsonaro said in a [live broadcast](#) in his social media channels Thursday that he is sorry for those two who were lost, "but life goes on."



A health worker checks the temperature of the locals as she tests for COVID-19 at the Indigenous Park, a tribal community in the outskirts of Manaus, Amazonas state, Brazil, Thursday, Jan. 7, 2021. Medical teams are scrambling to assist indigenous people living in outlying areas of Manaus, where medical care is scarce after authorities issued a "State of Emergency" due to rising numbers of infection numbers in Amazonas State. (AP Photo/Edmar Barros)



Worshippers with offerings for Yemanjá, goddess of the sea, walk on Copacabana beach during an Afro-Brazilian ceremony that is part of traditional New Year's celebrations to plea for relief from the new coronavirus pandemic and asks for a better new year, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Tuesday, Dec. 29, 2020. (AP Photo/Lucas Dumphreys)



People shop along the street "25 de Marco," an outdoor market area, days before a COVID-19 lockdown goes into effect in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Wednesday, Dec. 23, 2020. Only essential business will be allowed to operate from Dec. 25 - 27 and Jan. 1 - 3. (AP Photo/Carla Carniel)



Travelers wait to board an inter-state bus, amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Sao Paulo, Brazil, Wednesday, Dec. 30, 2020. Despite rising infection numbers in the country, Brazilians are flocking to airports and taking to the highways to visit friends and loved ones to usher in the new year and take advantage of a long weekend. (AP Photo/Andre Penner)



Relatives attend the burial of 71-year-old Jose Abelardo Bezerra, who died from COVID-19 related complications, at the Inhauma cemetery in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Thursday, Jan. 7, 2021. (AP Photo/Bruna Prado)



Health worker Vanda Ortega from the Witoto Indigenous group stands during a COVID-19 testing drive at the Indigenous Park, a tribal community in the outskirts of Manaus, Amazonas state, Brazil, Thursday, Jan. 7, 2021. Medical teams are scrambling to assist indigenous people living in outlying areas of Manaus, where medical care is scarce after authorities issued a "State of Emergency" due to rising numbers of infection numbers in Amazonas State. (AP Photo/Edmar Barros)



A new patient suspected of having COVID-19 is pulled into the Regional Hospital of Samambaia, which specializes in the care of coronavirus patients in Brasilia, Brazil, Thursday, Jan. 7, 2021. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)



A health worker stands at the entrance of the HRAN Hospital that specializes in the care of new coronavirus cases, after a new patient arrived in Brasilia, Brazil, Thursday, Jan. 7, 2021. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)



Protesters hold the Portuguese messages "Get out Bolsonaro," front right, and "It's not a market," referring to the health system, front left, outside the presidential palace in Brasilia, Brazil, Friday, Jan. 8, 2021, the day after Brazil passed 200,000 COVID-19 pandemic deaths. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)



A protester holds a map of Brazil featuring a stethoscope and the Portuguese message "200,000 deaths" outside the presidential palace in Brasilia, Brazil, Friday, Jan. 8, 2021, the day after Brazil passed 200,000 COVID-19 deaths. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)



A protester holds the Portuguese message "Get out Bolsonaro and Mourao" against Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and his vice president for their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, outside the presidential palace in Brasilia, Brazil, Friday, Jan. 8, 2021, the day after Brazil passed 200,000 pandemic deaths. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)



Protesters shout and hold the Portuguese message "Vaccinate now!" outside the presidential palace in Brasilia, Brazil, Friday, Jan. 8, 2021, the day after Brazil passed 200,000 COVID-19 pandemic deaths. (AP Photo/Eraldo Peres)

"There's no use in keeping that old story of staying home and the economy we will see later," the Brazilian president said. "That won't work, it will be chaos in Brazil. It could lead to even more dramatic consequences than those of the virus."

Even some Brazilians who consider themselves cautious are letting down their guards. Soccer fan Ricardo Santos, 46, says he covers his face each time he goes out, carries hand sanitizer in his bag and observes social distancing. But on Wednesday, he and a dozen of other Palmeiras fans hit a bar in downtown Sao Paulo to watch their team play.

"I spent New Year's with only two friends who live in the same building. I take precautions. But sometimes you have to accept a little risk to preserve your mental health, too," Santos said.

Back on Rio's Ipanema beach, Joao Batista Baria, 57, said he blamed authorities for not protecting its poorest residents.

"Everyone is talking about these beach parties, but crowding also happens on the bus, on the subway," Baria said while cleaning the foldable chairs tourists and residents rent to soak up the summer sun. "People come to the beach because they choose to. I need to take the bus to get to work."

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