

# In Brazil favela on stilts, COVID one on a long list of woes

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It's best to watch your step in Dique da Vila Gilda, a slum on stilts where the rickety walkways across the fetid water below the tin-roof shacks sometimes break beneath people's feet.

Deise Nascimento dos Santos, a 54-year-old resident of the

neighborhood—which holds the title of Brazil's biggest favela on stilts—learned that lesson the hard way: with 23 stitches, the result of a nasty fall outside her house.

"If you fall here, you stay here," she says.

Built on spindly wooden legs above the mangroves at the edge of the Bugres river, Dique da Vila Gilda is part of Santos, a city on Brazil's southeastern coast known for its beachfront gardens and the largest port in Latin America.

But the favela is a world apart from the resort district, a getaway for weekenders from wealthy Sao Paulo.

Here, the waterfront is putrid and littered with trash, houses are made of rusting metal and warped wood, and residents struggle to scrape out enough to survive.

The coronavirus pandemic—which has claimed more than half a million lives in Brazil, second only to the United States—has deepened the already stark inequalities dividing places like Dique da Vila Gilda from the more privileged side of town.

But COVID-19 is just one on a long list of woes in the slum, which was started—like most favelas—by rural migrants who arrived in the city looking for work and built impromptu houses in the only space they could find.

"We've got rats, cockroaches, dengue fever, chikungunya—everything," says Dos Santos's neighbor Eliette Alves.

She spends nearly 70 percent of her pension to pay the 500-reais (\$100) rent on the shack she shares with her son, even though the floor is water-

damaged and there is a gaping hole in her bedroom through which she can see the river below.

Her biggest fear is dying in a fire, like the one that razed several of her neighbors' houses in April.

"It was horrible—the sound of the wood crackling. All I could do was pray to God the flames wouldn't spread here," she says.

## **'Ticking bomb'**

The favela is a maze of makeshift walkways between the shacks, the gaps in the boards patched with scraps of wood and cardboard.

Below, trash cast off by the community's 26,000 inhabitants accumulates in the foul-smelling water.

"I wouldn't even say we're getting by. Getting by would mean having food on our plates, jobs, education, decent housing," says Lucileia Siqueira de Santos, 39.

She rails against President Jair Bolsonaro, who she says is failing poor Brazilians.

She calls him a "genocidal maniac," a line the far-right leader's critics use to condemn his anti-mask, anti-lockdown pandemic response.

But the frustration goes deeper than that. The pandemic turned an already desperate situation worse, costing many people in the favela their jobs, she says.

"Everyone's talking about COVID, but we've got a lot of other problems," she told AFP.

Juliana da Silva Barbosa, 35, is one example.

A [single mother](#) raising her six children in a small two-room shack, she lost her job as a nanny because of the pandemic and is now surviving on handouts.

She resents the lack of schools and internet to educate her children.

"The politicians only come here when they need our votes. This place is a ticking bomb," she says.

She has escaped COVID-19 so far, but contracted chikungunya, the mosquito-borne viral infection.

The crowded conditions and lack of sanitation in the favela leave residents highly exposed to communicable diseases.

Health services are non-existent in the slum.

"Ambulances only come here when somebody dies," says Barbosa.

"The [social worker](#) who used to come died of COVID," says Julio Silva, 39, who also lost his job in the pandemic.

At low tide, some residents venture out onto the water on homemade rafts to fish for their lunch.

Giovani Ferreira, 36, casts his net and pulls it back empty several times. But he doesn't give up. Earlier, he caught a tilapia and a mullet.

"The tide always brings something," he says with a smile.

Lucileia is less optimistic.

"We're at God's mercy here," she says.

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