

Brazil turns the tide with Covid-19 vaccines

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Despite a slow start plagued by much controversy that still haunts President Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's coronavirus vaccination campaign is now one of the fastest-paced and farthest-reaching in the world.

While boasting a globally renowned vaccination system, the country of

213 million people only started coronavirus inoculations in January, several weeks after the United States, many European countries and others in South America.

The rollout was delayed by political bickering under a president who belittled the pandemic and spread vaccine falsehoods, then hamstrung by logistical difficulties in the vast country.

But the country with the world's second-highest COVID-19 death toll—more than 588,000 fatalities reported to date—has seen its coronavirus vaccination rate pick up and its death rate tumble as imported jabs started arriving and local production began.

In the past three months, the number of Brazilians with at least one jab has almost tripled to cover 67.6 percent of the population—slightly higher than in the United States with 63.4 percent and Argentina with 63.8, according to an AFP count.

The figure for those fully vaccinated is much lower, at 36 percent—but enough to put Brazil in third place among the world's ten most populous countries.

With vaccine supply uncertain at first, Brazil decided to focus on giving a first dose to as large a number of people as possible, and opted for a long interval between the first and second jab.

'Little flu'

Logistical delivery problems have largely been ironed out through trial and error, and supply concerns are a thing of the past with Brazil now producing its own AstraZeneca and Sinovac jabs under license.

"The acceleration was seen from May-June, with the arrival and much

more consistent supply of vaccines," Jose David Urbaez of the Society of Infectious Disease told AFP.

As a result, from more than 2,000 daily deaths in June, there are now fewer than 600 per day.

Today, Brazil is the country with the fourth-most doses administered—a total of 214 million—after China, India and the United States.

It is administering the third-most doses daily—some 1.5 million on average per day in the last week, and has started giving shots to teenagers and booster shots to vulnerable people.

One problem the country does not have is vaccine skepticism: More than 90 percent of Brazilians have told pollsters they want the jab.

Brazil's recent success came despite a chaotic pandemic outset under the leadership of Bolsonaro, who at its height minimized the virus as a "little flu," fought lockdowns, questioned face masks and rejected various offers of vaccines while pushing unproven drugs such as hydroxychloroquine.

Last December, the president, who had himself contracted COVID-19, suggested the Pfizer vaccine may turn people into crocodiles, cause women to grow beards or men to become effeminate.

He long sought to discredit China's CoronaVac inoculation, even as the governor of Sao Paulo fought to have it approved.

Too late for Bolsonaro?

If the Bolsonaro government had started to negotiate with vaccine manufacturers in mid-2020, like many other countries, "by May or June

(this year) Brazil would have already vaccinated its target population," said Urbaez.

Bolsonaro's handling of the outbreak has contributed to his popularity tumbling to a lowly 22 percent, according to a poll Thursday, with frequent protest marches to call for his resignation.

There are dozens of outstanding impeachment bids against him, and a Senate committee is investigating his government's pandemic response.

Bolsonaro is also the subject of several criminal investigations—one of them concerning allegations that he sat on evidence of corruption in a COVID vaccine deal.

Bolsonaro, who came to power in 2019, has rejected all claims of government corruption, instead denouncing the legislature's inquiry as a political "antic" aimed at forcing him from office.

He will seek reelection in 2022, but worried about his chances, Bolsonaro has launched a series of attacks on the judiciary and the very electoral system itself.

"The acceleration of vaccination will have very positive consequences for Brazil, such as the reduction in the number of deaths and greater reopening of economic activity, but is unlikely to translate into an increase in popularity" for Bolsonaro, said political scientist Mauricio Santoro.

At a health center in Brasilia, retiree Monica de Barros, 57, received her second vaccine.

"Hundreds of thousands of deaths could have been avoided by firmer and less denialist action," she told AFP.

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