

Brazil's President and Health Minister Clash Over Coronavirus Measures

President Jair Bolsonaro wants to open economy while minister urges no letup on social distancing as virus spreads



Health workers aiding a patient suffering from Covid-19 at the ICU of a field hospital in Manaus, Brazil, on Tuesday.

PHOTO: BRUNO KELLY/REUTERS

By *Christiana Sciaudone* and [Luciana Magalhaes](#)

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SÃO PAULO—Intensive-care-unit beds in this megacity and in Rio de Janeiro are near capacity, health-care systems in other states are collapsing and at least two Brazilian governors have tested positive for the new coronavirus.

Against that backdrop, President Jair Bolsonaro was poised this week to fire his popular health minister, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, for publicly challenging the president's approach to the crisis, according to four people close to the two men and familiar with the matter.

Mr. Mandetta, who sought Wednesday to play down tensions with the president, has urged social isolation across the country, with only essential businesses open and most people remaining at home. Mr. Bolsonaro [supports what he calls “vertical isolation,”](#) proposing that high-risk populations, such as the elderly, stay home while businesses reopen—an approach meant to salvage an economy that was already fragile before the pandemic hit. All but two of Brazil's 27 governors have opted to decree their own stay-at-home measures, defying the president.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, left, talking last month in Brasília at a news conference about the coronavirus pandemic alongside Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta.

PHOTO: SERGIO LIMA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES



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ter clash—pitting a right-wing president who revels in the support of a fervent base against much of the country’s political establishment, including some former allies—comes as the number of people testing positive for Covid-19 has risen to 28,320 and the death count has topped 1,700.

That is the highest victim count of any Latin American country, but the pandemic may actually be even more widespread in Brazil. Rio de Janeiro’s Pontifical Catholic University recently estimated in a study that the real number of infected people in this country of 210 million is 10 times higher because of lack of testing. Mr. Mandetta said the number of those infected is expected to peak in May and June, alarming officials who say Brazil has done too little to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

“The president is sending us into a battle against an enemy we don’t know and whose methods we don’t know,” Arthur Virgílio Neto, the mayor of Manaus, a city of 1.8 million in the heart of the Amazon, said by phone. “The president needs to admit he was wrong and assume leadership...He has to go on TV and say he was wrong, that isolation is necessary to alleviate the hospitals and for the economy.”

For the president, however, the pandemic and its impact on businesses have devastated an economy that his administration hoped would grow on the back of economic reforms implemented last year. Instead, the economy is expected to contract 5.3% this year, according to the International Monetary Fund, the third-biggest slide among major economies in Latin America after Mexico and Argentina.

“Brazilians, wake up to reality,” Mr. Bolsonaro recently told supporters. “If we don’t wake up, soon it will be too late. There will be mass unemployment; chaos is coming.”



People waiting in line Wednesday outside a bank in Rio de Janeiro, where they sought emergency federal aid meant for vulnerable people amid the country's coronavirus outbreak.

PHOTO: RICARDO MORAES/REUTERS

Mr. Bolsonaro's actions in recent weeks haven't been popular. A Datafolha poll last week showed 33% of respondents saying they approved of his policies on the pandemic compared with 76% who supported Mr. Mandetta's approach to the crisis. At a news conference on Wednesday, Mr. Mandetta said he would leave if the president asks him to, if he gets sick or if he believes that the job is done.

São Paulo, Brazil's richest state, is among the states that have adopted the most drastic measures to fight the pandemic. Its governor, João Doria, who has extended social-isolation measures until April 22, has openly criticized Mr. Bolsonaro's call for Brazilians go back to work. And on Wednesday, he said it would be a disaster for the president to fire Mr. Mandetta.

"I'm not guided by populism. I'm guided by science," said Mr. Doria, a conservative who supported Mr. Bolsonaro's campaign for president. "All the initiatives in São Paulo are based on science and medical opinion."

In Rio de Janeiro, Gov. Wilson Witzel, another former ally of Mr. Bolsonaro who has nonetheless implemented a statewide quarantine until April 30, announced he has been infected by the virus. "I request once again that you stay at home," he said Tuesday via his Twitter account. "This sickness, as you can all perceive, does not discriminate, and contagion is rapid."

More than 70% of intensive-care-unit beds in his state are currently occupied and the number of coronavirus cases is rising fast. As of Wednesday, there were 3,743 confirmed cases in Rio de Janeiro state, with 265 deaths.

Far to the north, Manaus has run out of medical professionals to attend to the growing demand for treatment. The federal Health Ministry is deploying doctors and nurses from less hard-hit regions to Manaus to deal with the influx of cases. Mr. Mandetta also announced funding for the construction of a field hospital to attend to the indigenous population in the region.

Mr. Mandetta, a doctor and former congressman, has been clashing with Mr. Bolsonaro for weeks, but an appearance on the highly popular “Fantastico” television show Sunday led to new tensions. The minister indirectly criticized Mr. Bolsonaro, who posts videos of himself wading into crowds of supporters, for not adhering to the calls for isolation. He said Brazilians were confused as to whether to listen to his advice or the president’s when it comes to the coronavirus.



Residents of the Dona Marta favela in Rio de Janeiro sanitizing the area on Monday to stanch the spread of coronavirus.

PHOTO: ANTONIO LACERDA/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

Mr. Mandetta later said in another interview that he had gone too far in his comments on “Fantastico.” This week, key cabinet members who had previously defended Mr. Mandetta criticized him for overstepping. “Mandetta crossed the line and committed a penalty,” Vice President Gen. Hamilton Mourão said on Tuesday, tempering his comments by saying now isn’t a good time to shake up the cabinet.

Brazilians appear to be heeding the minister over the president. More than half of Brazilians with smartphones that can be tracked were adhering to stay-at-home mandate, according to In Loco, a technology company that specializes in geolocation data. Still, the isolation rates are lower than in other South American countries, which in March instituted drastic quarantines, some under threat of fines for violations.

Data from Google's Covid-19 Community Mobility Reports, which tracks phones, showed that in South America, Peru has seen the greatest reduction in visits and lengths of stays at retailers, mass-transit stations and workplaces, with visits down by more than 90%. Brazil is ahead of only Mexico in terms of people abiding by stay-at-home calls. Here, visits to supermarkets and pharmacies are down 24%, for instance, while they are down by 95% in Peru.

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