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“Just a little flu” COVID-19 in Brazil

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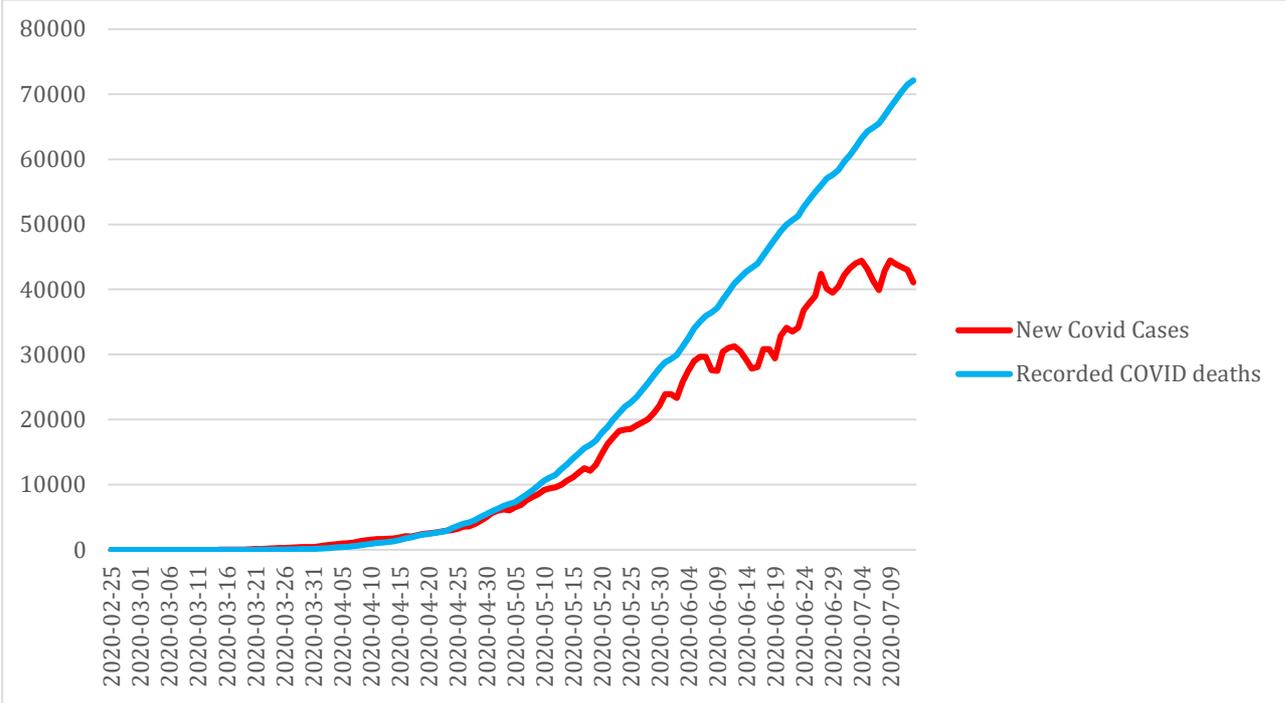
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“Just a little flu”, COVID-19 in Brazil

Opinion Paper – Kieran Spencer, July 2020

Brazil has been one of the worst hit countries by the COVID-19 pandemic. As of early July 2020 Brazil is the country with the second-most cases of COVID-. This is about double the number of cases in the third hardest-hit country India.¹ In late June, Brazil’s daily death toll overtook that of the US to make Brazil the country with the highest number of daily deaths. The Brazilian health ministry indicate that the first case of COVID-19 was recorded in Brazil on February 25th 2020. Between the beginning of the pandemic and mid-July, over 70,000 Brazilians have died of the disease, making COVID-19 the single deadliest natural event in Brazilian history.

Figure 1: COVID-19 deaths and new cases in Brazil (July 20th, 2020)



Source: Our World in Data²

Health experts believe that one of the reasons for the rapid spread after the first case was because Corona Virus actually entered Brazil and began to spread undetected several weeks earlier.³ This would mean that the virus was present during the country’s massive Carnival festival which took place between February 21st and 26th. Carnival entails millions of Brazilians traveling all over the country to see massive parades that involve close proximity. After Carnival Brazil suspended its football season on March 15th due to the Corona Virus.⁴ After the virus was detected Brazil took action to prevent large scale gatherings and restrict entry of foreigners who might be infected with the virus. In the weeks following Carnival, Brazil started to implement lock downs which prevented other large events which could have

¹ Worldometers. (2020, July 19) “COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic” <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus>
² Our World in Data. (2020, July 19) 7 day rolling average used for New Covid Cases Dataset “Corona Virus Pandemic” <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>
³ Medical Xpress. (2020, May 12) “Coronavirus was in Brazil before carnival: study” <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-coronavirus-brazil-carnival.html>
⁴ beIn Sports. (2020, March 15) “Brazil suspends football matches over coronavirus” AFP. <https://www.beinsports.com/en/brazilian-league/news/brazil-suspends-football-matches-over-coronav/1434617>

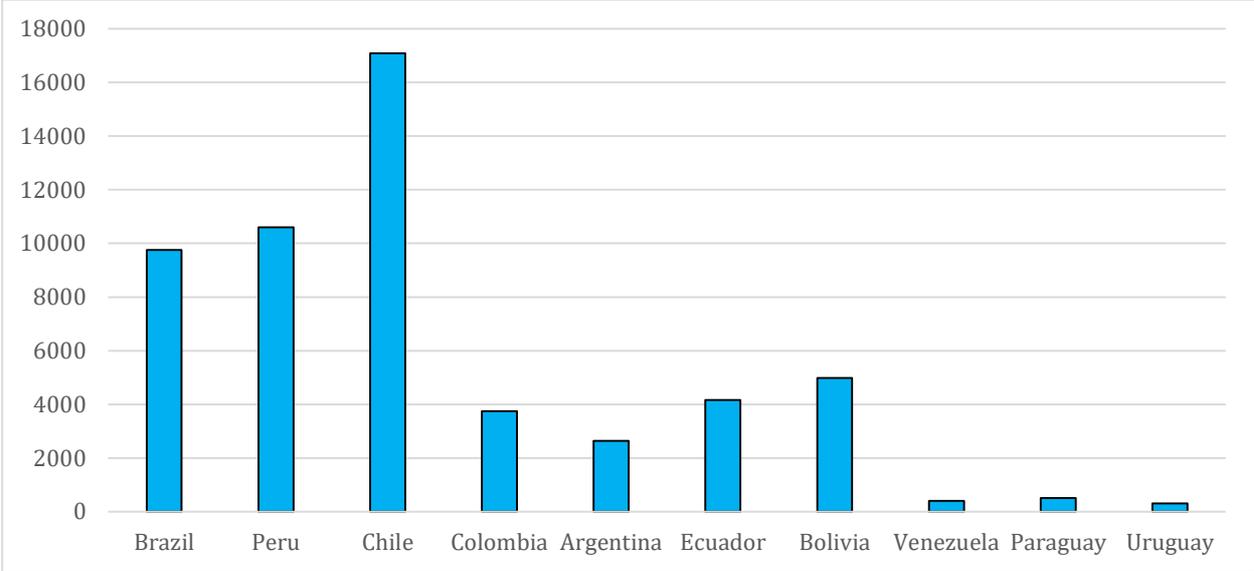
spread the virus. Brazil closed all eight of its land borders on March 19th.⁵ Finally closing all borders including airports to most foreign nationals on March 30th.⁶ Despite these restrictions Brazil failed to contain the virus.

The virus first spread through wealthier sections of the population as these individuals were more likely to be in contact with people who travel to the US and Europe. In late spring this trend began to shift as the virus continued to grow exponentially and worked its way through other sections of Brazilian society. While the official trendline and high number of recorded infections already show that the crises is bad in Brazil, low per capita testing rates suggest that the reality is probably much worse than the official statistics show.

This continued spread is beginning to hit rural and indigenous individuals especially hard with death rate being far higher for indigenous communities than the rest of the population. This is because these groups have less ability to socially distance and less access to modern health care facilities. One analysis by Brazil’s Indigenous Affairs agency found that the COVID-19 death rate for indigenous Brazilians is a shocking 9.1% nearly twice the rate for other Brazilians.⁷

In addition to the local hardship the large number of cases has increased travel restrictions. The Brazilian problem also takes place in a wider context of more COVID-19 cases in Latin America.⁸ While Brazil does not have the highest per capita numbers of COVID 19 infections in South America, its high overall number of cases is reflective of the fact that it is the most populous country in South America.

Figure 2: Reported COVID-19 cases per million in major South American countries (July 20th 2020)



Source: Our World in Data⁹

⁵ Lewis, J. and Vyas, K. (2020 March 19) “Coronavirus Forces Brazil to Seal Borders as Region Struggles to Control Pandemic” WSJ. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/coronavirus-forces-brazil-to-seal-borders-as-region-struggles-to-control-pandemic-11584644650>

⁶ Salcedo, A, Yar, S and Cherehus, G. (2020, June 12). “Coronavirus Travel Restrictions, Across the Globe” New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-travel-restrictions.html>

⁷ Wallace, S. (2020, June 12). “Disaster looms for indigenous Amazon tribes as COVID-19 cases multiply” National Geographic. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/06/disaster-looms-indigenous-amazon-tribes-covid-19-cases-multiply/>

⁸ AlJazeera. (2020, June 25) “Latin America and Caribbean pass 100,000 COVID-19 deaths” <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/latin-america-caribbean-pass-100000-covid-19-deaths-200624131704153.html>

⁹ Our World in Data (2020, July 20) “New Covid Cases Dataset “Corona Virus Pandemic” <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>

President Bolsonaro and COVID-19

It is impossible to separate the COVID-19 crisis in Brazil from the rhetoric and performance of its populist president Jair Bolsonaro. From the beginning of the pandemic Bolsonaro has worked to undermine restrictions designed to prevent the spread of COVID-19, challenged the country's leading scientists and provided the media with a never-ending stream of erratic quotes about the virus. He tested positive for COVID-19 himself on July 7th.¹⁰ In March Bolsonaro famously called the disease a "flu"¹¹. In the first months of the virus he reacted accordingly by refusing to endorse social distancing or the wearing of masks.¹²

These words and actions have changed the face of Brazil's response and amplified the impact of the pandemic. While European leaders were acting in unison to emphasize the importance of social distancing, Brazil's top elected official was battling with state authorities to undermine lockdowns. In mid-March, when European head of state were calling on their citizens to stay at home to save lives, Bolsonaro ignored warnings and downplayed the cost of life caused by the pandemic. He even was seen on camera wiping his nose and then shaking the hand of an elderly supporter.¹³ Bolsonaro fired one health minister while a second quit over his refusal to implement adequate social distancing requirements. This non-strategy has had the impact that one might expect.

As many countries have discovered, there are common sense mitigation strategies, such as hygienic measures, facemasks, and contact tracing that can reduce infectivity without harming the economy. Instead implementing appropriate social distancing and compromises based on such solutions Bolsonaro has opposed virtually every solution proposed. In some cases, Bolsonaro's government has even gone so far as to try to hide data about infections. In early June the government simply removed certain daily statistics from the health ministry's website.¹⁴ A court later reversed this decision.

Bolsonaro has mirrored the response of his ideological ally in the north, Donald Trump. Both leaders ignored early warnings, sparred with their own health experts and have even taken the same unproven to drug, hydroxychloroquine.¹⁵ In Trump's case as a preventative measure, in Bolsonaro's to reduce symptoms of the virus he already has. The key difference with Bolsonaro is that in many ways he is willing to take his populist style even further than Trump. The US president complained about his health advisors but his Brazilian counterpart had no issues outright firing his health minister over a dispute about lockdowns. Since the pandemic started Trump has held one rally in a city that was not in lockdown. Bolsonaro on the other hand personally attended anti-lockdown rallies in areas were practicing social distancing.¹⁶

¹⁰ New York Times "President Bolsonaro of Brazil Tests Positive for Coronavirus" Londoño, E, Andreoni, M and Casado, L. (2020, July 7) "President Bolsonaro of Brazil Tests Positive for Coronavirus" New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/world/americas/brazil-bolsonaro-coronavirus.html>

¹¹ BBC. (2020, July 8) "Corona Virus: Brazil's President Bolsonaro tests positive" <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-53319517>

¹² Borges, A. (2020, April 10) "'A little flu': Brazil's Bolsonaro playing down coronavirus crisis" Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/06/a-little-flu-brazil-s-bolsonaro-playing-down-coronavirus-crisis>

¹³ BBC. (2020, April 11) "Coronavirus: Brazil reports over 1,000 deaths" <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-52251342>

¹⁴ Phillips, T and Briso, C.B. (2020, June 9) "Judge orders Bolsonaro to resume publishing Brazil Covid-19 data" The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/09/judge-orders-bolsonaro-to-resume-publishing-brazil-covid-19-data>

¹⁵ Porterfield, C.(2020 July, 10) "Bolsonaro Is Taking Hydroxychloroquine To Treat His Coronavirus" Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carlieporterfield/2020/07/08/bolsonaro-is-taking-hydroxychloroquine-to-treat-his-coronavirus/#6332dfd4237f>

¹⁶ BBC. (2020, April 20) "Coronavirus: Brazil's Bolsonaro joins anti-lockdown protests" <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-52351636>

Bolsonaro has also managed to make more outrageous statements than even Trump. In several instances Bolsonaro has made disturbing jokes about his citizens dying such as stating “We are sorry for all the dead, but that’s everyone’s destiny”.¹⁷ He further pushed a range of other conspiracies and baseless ideas such as that Brazilians are naturally immune to COVID-19 because they can “swim in sewage” and “don’t catch a thing.”¹⁸ In a quote in late April Bolsonaro famously said: “So what, I mourn the deaths, what do you want me to do? I do not perform miracles”. In another strange quote in May the Brazilian President ironically said that he “didn’t want to turn the country into a cemetery”, referring to its businesses rather than its people.¹⁹

Bolsonaro’s erratic approach is not popular with most Brazilian people. This uproar can literally be heard in the streets of many of Brazil’s major cities at night as thousands of citizens bang pots and pans to protest his actions. Bolsonaro is the least popular elected president since Brazil returned to Democracy in the 1980s. Even before the pandemic, polling indicated that 49% of Brazilians believed that the remainder of his presidency would be “bad or terrible”.²⁰ These results are particularly astounding because 4 of the 6 democratically elected presidents Brazil has previously had have been impeached or found guilty of corruption. It has even alienated political allies including the governor of Sao Paulo, Brazil’s largest city.

Despite his low level of overall support, the President maintains a dedicated core of support from about a third of the Brazilian population including many members of the military, which has cheered him on as he flouts democratic and political norms. There are also rumors that elements within the military may be planning a coup to restore stability to the country.²¹ The president’s supporters have even protested in favor of a constitutional coup to take control of the judiciary and legislature.

Brazil’s courts and prosecutors have been quick to push back on many of the most provocative actions. After months of defiance, just before he caught the coronavirus, Bolsonaro was ordered by a federal judge to follow local laws and wear a mask in public.²² His government was also compelled to restore COVID statistics to the national health website. In response, police have raided homes of many of prominent supporters for suspicion of funding anti-democratic activities.²³ Political scientists in the country such as, Paulo Kramer a professor at the University of Brasilia insist that a coup is still unlikely and leading military officers have indicated they would not support one.²⁴ Regardless the suggestions that one could occur add to the already high levels of political instability.

¹⁷ Walsh, D. (2020, June 4) “Coronavirus Rips Into Regions Previously Spared” New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/world/middleeast/coronavirus-egypt-america-africa-asia.html>

¹⁸ Collman, A. (2020, March 27) “Brazilian President Bolsonaro suggested his people are naturally immune to the coronavirus” Business insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-jair-bolsonaro-suggests-brazilians-immune-to-disease-baseless-2020-3>

¹⁹ Lewis, J. and Vyas, K. (2020 May 8) “Brazilian States Expand Coronavirus Restrictions as Death Toll Mounts” WSJ. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/brazilian-states-expand-coronavirus-restrictions-as-death-toll-mounts-11588977011>

²⁰ Encarnación, O. (2020, May 28) “Brazil Is Suffering. Bolsonaro Isn’t.” Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/28/brazil-is-suffering-bolsonaro-isnt/>

²¹ Romero, S, Casado, L and Andreoni, M (2020, June 18) “Threat of Military Action Rattles Brazil as Virus Deaths Surge” New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/10/world/americas/bolsonaro-coup-coronavirus-brazil.html>

²² Pedroso, R and Register, L. (2020, June 23) “Brazil judge orders President Jair Bolsonaro to wear a face mask in public” CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/23/americas/brazil-bolsonaro-coronavirus-mask-intl/index.html>

²³ DW. (2020, June 16) “Brazil: Police raid Bolsonaro supporters' homes, offices” <https://www.dw.com/en/brazil-police-raid-bolsonaro-supporters-homes-offices/a-53833411>

²⁴ Boadle, A. (2020, June 22) “Threat of Brazil military coup unfounded, retired generals say” Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-politics-military-analysis/threat-of-brazil-military-coup-unfounded-retired-generals-say-idUSKBN23T1JW>

Local measures

Most of the restrictions related to COVID-19 have been implemented by local leaders in Brazil. Local restrictions were originally much more relaxed than those in Europe, but they have not been loosened as quickly as those in other countries, such as the Czech Republic, due to the persistence of high levels of transmission. The central government also sets rules outlining which businesses are essential and cannot be closed by regional or local decree. This includes essential services, natural gas-related industries, health products, industrial activities, and most controversial, gyms and hair salons.

Map 1: Map of Brazil COVID-19 infections July 20, 2020



Source: Brazilian Health Ministry²⁵

Sao Paulo

The largest city in South America was the original epicenter of the virus in Brazil. The state of Sao Paulo has been particularly hard hit, having more cases than the entire country of England.²⁶ In many ways the situation was comparable to the New York City at its worst, with hospitals filled to capacity and the health care system on the verge of collapse. Despite the fact that deaths in the state have not yet significantly reduced, restrictions have begun to ease. Street shopping has been allowed since mid-June but still requires shoppers to wear a mask.

Rio de Janeiro

While reported infections in Rio briefly eclipsed COVID 19 infections in Sao Paulo, the death rate in Rio is less than half its peak even as infection rates have yet to fall significantly. The state-imposed stay at home requiring residents to refrain from leaving their home except for essential activities similar to those seen in Europe at the beginning of the pandemic.

²⁵ Health Ministry of Brazil. (2020, July 20) “COVID 19 cases by municipality”. (in Portuguese) <https://covid.saude.gov.br/>

²⁶ Gonçalo, Jr. (2020, June 13) “Sao Paulo has more cases of COVID-19 then all of England” UOL. (in Portuguese) <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/agencia-estado/2020/06/13/sao-paulo-tem-mais-casos-de-covid-19-do-que-toda-a-inglaterra.htm>

Restrictions requiring the wearing of masks on public transportation and spaces remain in place. More recently officials from the state and the city of Rio de Janeiro clashed as state officials-maintained restrictions while the city opened its beaches and outdoor recreation areas in early June.

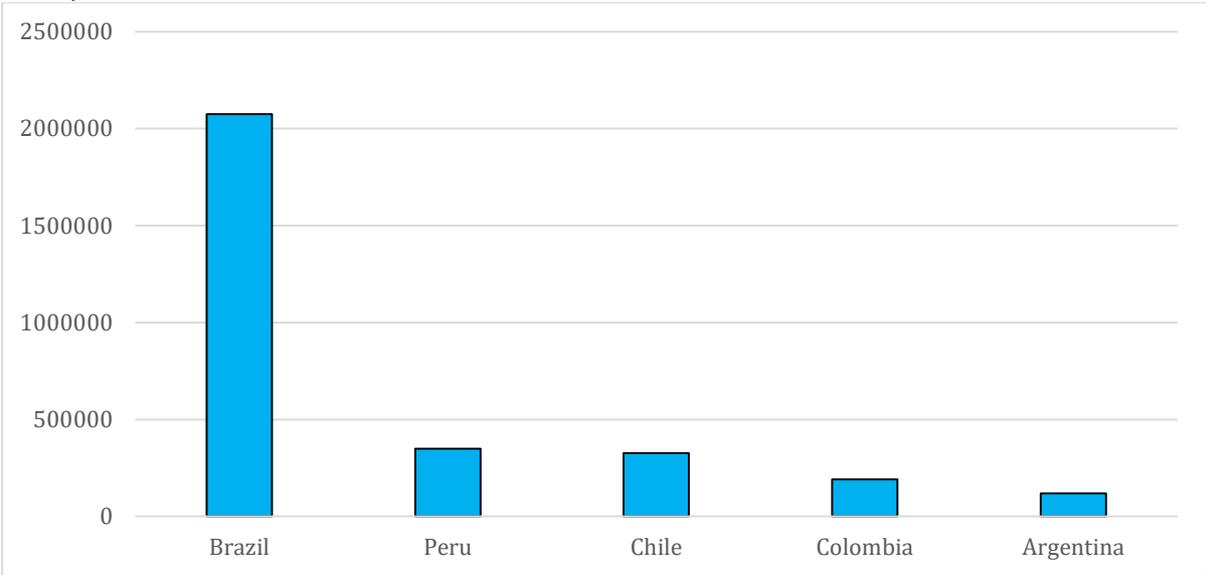
Other areas of Brazil

The virus continues to spread outside of the major cities and into more rural areas and the Amazon population centers. This has had the troubling impact of shifting the burden of the virus to those who are least well equipped to manage it. In the states of Minas Geras and Bahia southeastern Brazil continue to have record daily death tolls. Despite these local leaders have continued to reopen, allowing bars and restaurants to open in many regional cities. Several other cities have instituted severe restrictions on arrivals from other parts of the country. Overall restrictions seem less strict than those in Europe were at their peak and they have relaxed even before the country hit its peak. Restrictions seem overly relaxed given the severity of the pandemic in the country.

In addition to municipalities, many non-governmental actors have made changes to slow the spread of the virus. Brazilian sporting leagues cancelled competitions in early March and they have remained off the pitch since. Many other important conferences and business events were canceled in early March as well.

International Consequences

Figure 3: Total registered COVID-19 cases in largest South American countries (July 20th 2020)



Source: Our World in Data²⁷

While Bolsonaro has been popular with his political twin Donald Trump in the US, the crises have alienated many of Brazil’s South American neighbors and harmed the reputation of Brazil abroad. Brazil is currently a world leader I COVID-19 cases. This has caused neighbors including Argentina and Paraguay to step up measures to prevent Brazilians from illegally entering the country, with more countries expressing their worries about transmission coming

²⁷ Our World in Data (2020, July 20) “New Covid Cases Dataset “Corona Virus Pandemic” <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus>

from Brazil.²⁸ Even traditional allies such as Bolivia have criticized Brazil's handling of the virus. On May 17th the US added Brazil to its travel ban list meaning that most individuals cannot travel to the US within two weeks of being in Brazil.²⁹ Overall although the long-term impact of the pandemic remains to be seen, Brazil has lost the respect of many of its neighbors which will inevitably darken its reputation and lessen its ability to be seen as a regional leader.

We can talk about two core factors which contribute to the high numbers of deaths and cases in Brazil, its large population, and its populist leader. Brazil is a typical example of how a populist leader who ignores scientific facts can cause worse health outcomes for his people. This mismanagement might continue to impact the region for years to come and some of the future negative impact might be:

1. Bolsonaro will have much less support in the political climate in Brazil
2. Brazil will be less stable and will have a higher risk of a coup and civil unrest
3. Brazil will likely continue to spread the COVID-19 Virus to the rest of Latin America even if other countries control the virus



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Raised in a small town in the US. Kieran graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Degree in International Relations from Bilgi University in Istanbul. He is currently pursuing a master's Degree in Public Policy and Security in Kaunas Lithuania. In addition, he has worked and studied in Palestine, Portugal, Peru, Lithuania and Zambia. His fields of interest include international development, international education and international relations with a particular emphasis on Central and Eastern Europe.

²⁸ Associated Press. (2020, April 30) "As Virus Cases Surge, Brazil Starts to Worry Its Neighbors" VOA. <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/virus-cases-surge-brazil-starts-worry-its-neighbors>

²⁹ US Department of Homeland Security. (2020, May 27) "Department of Homeland Security Adds Brazil to List of Countries for COVID-19 Travel Restrictions" <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2020/05/27/departament-homeland-security-adds-brazil-list-countries-covid-19-travel-restrictions>

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