

## The coronavirus has come roaring back into Brazil, shattering illusions it wouldn't.

By Terrence McCoy and Heloísa Traiano

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RIO DE JANEIRO — For weeks, it has seemed to Carla Santos de Lima that people here have been in the thrall of a collective delusion that the pandemic was on the way out.

The beaches, bars and restaurants had filled. The message: Rio de Janeiro was back.

The pleasant fiction held for weeks — even as people explained away surging coronavirus cases as a temporary blip. It finally unraveled late last month for Santos de Lima.

Her elderly father had fallen gravely ill with the coronavirus. The family had launched a desperate search to find an intensive care bed for him. But they were all full with other covid-19 patients.

He died Nov. 28, inside an ambulance outside the hospital, just as his long-awaited bed opened up.

“When the restrictions were relaxed, it resulted in this illusion that the problem was under control,” said Santos de Lima, 33, a public school teacher. “People believed it was possible to resume a certain normality. This ended up bringing about for us a false sense of security.”

The city — and much of Brazil — is grappling with the sudden realization that there is nothing secure about this moment. The coronavirus has suddenly roared back.

And there's now the chance that even in pandemic-battered Brazil — where more people have died of the virus than any other nation save the United States — things could soon become as bad, if not worse, than ever before.

Brazil ignored the warnings. Now, while other countries fret over a second coronavirus wave, it can't get past its first.

In Rio de Janeiro, where the virus has already killed tens of thousands, upturned the economy and sent rates of homelessness soaring, moments that recall the darkest days of the pandemic are once more appearing in the news.

Sick people, unable to get help in the medical system, are again being found dead at home. Lines stretching into the hundreds are forming for intensive care beds. Hospital officials are warning of supply shortages and an imminent collapse in medical services.

Even the vaunted private health-care system reached 98 percent capacity in its intensive care units this past week, officials said. In states across the country, the situation wasn't much better.

“Brazil has to be very, very serious,” Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director general of the World Health Organization, told reporters this past week. The situation is “very, very worrisome.”

But public health experts in Rio de Janeiro are expressing alarm over what they are seeing — both from officials and also from ordinary people.

In May, during the worst weeks of the first wave, city life was vastly constrained. Even if Rio never fully locked down, shops and restaurants closed, people worked from home and several field hospitals were opened.

This time is different. There is neither talk of field hospitals, nor restrictions on businesses. The streets and beaches remain full of unmasked people who are either unaware or unbothered by the alarming health warnings.

As coronavirus kills indigenous people in the Amazon, Brazil's government goes missing

"We are not going to take a step backward," acting Rio de Janeiro governor Cláudio Castro said Thursday, conceding the difficulty of reinstating restrictions. "It's no use to pass measures that the population won't follow."

On Friday, Castro and Rio Mayor Marcelo Crivella announced the opening of more hospital beds and that city schools would halt classes. But health officials across the country are warning that such minor restrictions almost certainly won't be enough.

The most powerful weapon against the coronavirus — fear — has dulled. Many people either simply don't care or no longer believe in the dangers posed by the virus.

"We're facing a campaign of disinformation and denial," said Suzana Lobo, president of the Brazilian Association of Intensive Medicine. "The impact in January will be very, very large. Our fear is that in January and February, the health system won't be able to bear it."

In a fiercely individualistic society, where people have little trust in either government or each other, the pandemic has, from the beginning, been a mass social experiment in the limits of scientific persuasion. But now, public health officials are increasingly worried that their warnings don't matter.

"It's this story: 'My life for a dip in the ocean,' " said Ligia Bahia, a public health professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. "It's as if we haven't learned any lessons. For us, it's very sad.

"We're completely defeated," she added. "I don't even want to talk about a vaccine."

Now, many Brazilians who have been victimized by the disease only see a year filled with mistakes, errors in judgment and confusion.

Latin America had time to prepare for the coronavirus. It couldn't stop the inevitable.

Santos de Lima, the teacher, said everyone in her family, who live in the impoverished and crime-plagued area of Pavuna, had been petrified of the disease. But as cases began to diminish, the city relaxed almost all of its containment measures.

"Very, very, very irresponsible," Santos de Lima now says of the decision.

But at the time, she, along with much of the city, was loosening up. Allowing herself to believe the worst had passed, she went back to the classroom. And her family started to get together once more, even though her 65-year-old father, Carlos Alberto Correia de Lima, was in poor health. Much of the family soon had the coronavirus.

Now, many of them can't look past the guilt.

"You ask whether we are responsible for what happened," she said. "We keep asking if things could have been different, if our contact could have been avoided."

But she can't come up with any good answers.

"The guideline is to avoid contact, but are we supposed to stay in complete isolation for nine months?"

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