
Special Commentary: COVID-19 and Brazil: Why the US-Brazil Relationship Matters More Than Ever

August 12, 2020 | Dr. José de Arimatéia da Cruz, PhD/MPH

The global pandemic known as the novel Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has been wreaking havoc upon the world since it was first detected in Wuhan, China, at the end of December 2019. The disease rapidly spread to all provinces in China, as well as a number of countries overseas, and was [declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern](#) by the Director-General of the World Health Organization on 30 January 2020. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) contends that the COVID-19 pandemic is having [widespread economic, social, and political effects on Latin America and the Caribbean](#), a region with strong economic and political ties to the United States. Brazil has been particularly hit hard by COVID-19. It has become a global epicenter for the disease with the second most COVID-19 positive cases in the world after the United States. Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro announced July 8, 2020, that he had contracted the virus.

The total number of deaths resulting from [COVID-19 in Brazil](#) has reached over one hundred thousand and the number of Brazilians infected has reached over 3.1 million. The rate of infections in Brazil continues to rise daily. The high rate of infection in Brazil is the result of several factors, including a poorly funded public health system, an overreliance on the public health system (thus placing the system under immense strain), and poor overall infrastructure. However, the most important factor behind the current situation is the government's failure to take actions early on that were necessary to address the pandemic. In fact, government officials downplayed the disease when it first arrived in Brazil, calling it a *gripizinha* (little flu). Government leaders also discouraged social distancing practices necessary to prevent the proliferation of the virus. Further, government officials downplayed the risks of the virus even after nearly fifty thousand deaths from COVID-19 in three months, saying [the impact of social isolation measures on the economy could be worse than the disease](#) itself. Brazil's government is also responsible for exacerbating the proliferation of the pandemic with [confusing and contradictory messaging](#). Some in the government criticized social distancing and flooded social media platforms with misinformation about the virus. Others in the government touted the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine as a cure for COVID-19, [despite several studies questioning](#)

[the credibility](#) of such claims. Also, during the brunt of the pandemic in Brazil, the Ministry of Health has not had stable leadership. This continual transition in leadership has left the ministry without a clear plan of action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

Brazil's inability to set a responsible health policy to combat COVID-19 is having a tremendous impact on Brazil's most vulnerable population: the residents of *favelas* (shantytowns). Brazil's *favelados* live under the most desperate circumstances imaginable. Most [favelas are controlled by gangs](#) or *milicianos*. Sanitization, electricity, and garbage collection is sometimes nonexistent, thus contributing to the spread of diseases that have otherwise been eradicated around the world. Brazil is a country plagued by deep inequality, resulting in the [pandemic hitting poor communities the hardest](#). In Rio de Janeiro, the virus has swept through favelas with lethal force, aided by a lack of running water, poor sanitation, and cramped housing. Self-isolation has been impossible for many residents who work in the informal sector cleaning homes or delivering food. Given the federal government's inability to enforce curfews, criminal syndicates have stepped in to enforce them in Rio's favelas. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic and fears of it spreading through these densely populated favelas, local gangs and militias are imposing social controls in the form of curfews to limit the spread of the disease. Numerous reports have cited the *Comando Vermelho* (Red Command) gang specifically and their [imposition of a coronavirus curfew](#) in the *Cidade de Deus* (City of God) favela.

Brazil's indigenous population has also been impacted by COVID-19. Despite the [alarming death rate among the indigenous population](#), there is little assistance on the horizon. In 1988, the Brazilian government [discouraged contacts with the Amazon's indigenous population](#) except in cases to prevent medical emergencies, warfare between tribes, or other catastrophes. In an effort to assist the indigenous population with COVID-19, Brazil's Congress passed an emergency plan for indigenous communities that would not only provide medical equipment and field hospitals but also potable water and food supplies that allow tribes to isolate themselves. But this plan still needs to be approved by the senate and get a green light from the president. An additional problem contributing to the high rate of infection among the indigenous Brazilian population is [deforestation and forest fires in the Amazon](#) region. Deforestation and forest fires have led many of the indigenous population to move to urban centers where they can end up in precarious living conditions with few public services. This only increases their vulnerability to health dangers, especially COVID-19.

Brazil, once heralded as an example to follow when it came to promoting global equality in health-care access, especially with the outbreak of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, today is diplomatically isolated as the pandemic rages due to the country's lack of infrastructure, reduced credibility, and uneven leadership. The federal government's handling of the pandemic has done much to [injure Brazil's international stature](#) in the field of health. The [Brazilian government has disregarded the World Health Organization's COVID-19 recommendations](#), threatened to pull out of the World Health Organization, and attempted to halt the publication of cumulative data of documented COVID-19 cases.

For many Latin American countries, Brazil has become an unreliable partner. They perceive that Brazil has given up regional leadership and now even right-wing governments are keeping a safe distance from Brazil's diplomatic disruptions. With Brazil becoming the new epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic—and failing to act in response—its stature has further eroded. Paraguay and Uruguay have both closed their borders with Brazil in order to slow the spread of the coronavirus into their territory. The current socioeconomic and diplomatic challenges facing Venezuela in light of the COVID-19 pandemic have also stretched an already [strained relationship between Brazil and Venezuela](#). With a heavy influx of Venezuelan migrants into Brazil's State of Roraima, Venezuelan migrants are being blamed for several crimes committed there and are increasingly facing xenophobia related discrimination.

Whether through naïveté or diplomatic hubris, Brazil seems to discount the realities of the international system of the twenty-first century. The post-Cold War world is more globalized and deeply interdependent than ever. What happens halfway around the world eventually has domestic implications, and the COVID-19 pandemic is a good example of this. Brazil cannot continue to go it alone. It will need the broader scientific community and the support of key partners to combat this deadly virus.

The US Army can play an important role in this battle against the COVID-19 pandemic and ought to do everything within its capability to support Brazil's fight against this deadly pandemic. In Brazil, where testing is scarce and the health system is overwhelmed, the US Army could partner with the Brazilian Armed Forces not only to avoid the contagion effect on the continent, but also to assist in other areas under strain such as the Amazon region and states in Brazil's North East region. This support is critical. Brazil is a "monster country" in Latin America, according to George Kennan in his book *Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy*. Whatever happens in Brazil will have a ripple effect in other countries of the region. Brazil's ability to combat this pandemic head on could have long-term effects for the region and in the relationship between Brazil and the United States. For example, due to COVID-19, the US government [has barred the entry of Brazilians](#) into the United States unless they are permanent residents. The European Union (EU) has opened its doors to several countries where COVID-19 has been under control or the rate of infection has diminished. But, Brazil's infected rate is still extremely high and its citizens are still denied entrance into EU countries as a result.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) had previously forecasted a rate of 1.6% economic growth for the region prior to the pandemic. The [IMF has since revised its projections](#) and now forecasts an economic contraction of 9.4% for the region with almost every country in recession. This economic decline and recession will exacerbate income inequality and poverty throughout the region. This could create an influx of immigrants into the United States taking advantage of porous borders. For Brazilians who have lost hope in their government, they may be encouraged to migrate to the United States as the health care systems collapses and the government loses its legitimacy and ability to respond to the pandemic. [Weak governments](#) can create fertile ground for organized criminal gangs to terrorize the population and drive even

more people to desperately flee into the United States. Such immigration would contribute to the further spread of COVID. The US Army can help to prevent an influx of immigrants into the United States from Brazil and elsewhere by coordinating stronger border security measures and by assisting the exchange of information about COVID-19 hotspots. The US Army, in the spirit of cooperation and partnership with Brazil, can prevent, detect, and respond to the pandemic. Doing so can slow or prevent COVID-19 from further spreading to the United States.

The sudden economic downturn and increasing private and public debt due to the COVID-19 outbreak has combined with the strain on people, businesses, and governments to create a [fertile ground for criminogenic asymmetries](#)—a condition in which inequalities and gaps between the legitimate and illegitimate provision of scarce public goods leads to group grievances that feed violent movements. As Richard Hass contends in his book, *The World: A Brief Introduction*, health-related costs and crises can turn a strong, successful society into a weak and dysfunctional one. The US Army should help Brazil fight corruption and criminality during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interaction between various Criminal Armed Groups (CAGs—criminal cartels, gangs, militias, and mafias) is complex and historically has varied by time and place. The arrival of COVID-19 has exacerbated a number of socio-political trends that further undermine the government's authority and legitimacy. These include corruption, poor governance, absence of the rule of law, nationalism, xenophobia, and attacks on the traditional institutions of good governance. Furthermore, terrorists, rebels, and insurgents (both political and criminal) are likely to exploit the pandemic to further their goals. The US Army should help Brazil to build upon humanitarian initiatives as a means of stabilizing communities and reducing criminal violence. The success of these efforts—for all participants—remains to be seen.

The US Army should also assist Brazil during the pandemic by helping to strengthen Brazil's nascent democracy. The US Army's stance as an apolitical organization subordinate to civilian authority and its public communications tools could greatly bolster Brazil's efforts to grow its own democratic institutions. According to a ["parasite stress" hypothesis](#), authoritarian governments are more common where disease is more prevalent. Increases in [authoritarian practices](#) will further weaken democratic institutions, politicize judicial systems, increase corruption, and lead to an increase in the rate of crime and violence. Brazil cannot afford to reverse the democratic gains of the past three decades. Authoritarianism or bureaucratic authoritarianism is not the panacea for Brazil's public health crisis. Authoritarian leaders do not advance their countries but instead lead them into war, famine, and humanitarian crises. Brazil is a peace-loving nation. Brazil shares with the United States its adherence to a free, open, and prosperous society. If humanity intends to [reverse authoritarianism](#), research and history have shown us that it means we have to defeat infectious disease.

In conclusion, the US Army should assist Brazil by sharing information of the ongoing illicit activities in the region, training the region's militaries in public health response and epidemiology, and strengthening Brazil's democratic institutions. The US Army can also use the full force of the Army's Public Health Center (APHC) to assist Brazil while enhancing its global

health diplomacy. As the APHC states on its [website](#), their mission is to enhance Army readiness by identifying and assessing current and emerging health threats, developing and communicating public health solutions, and assuring the quality and effectiveness of the Army's Public Health Enterprise. The US Army, in the spirit of cooperation and partnership with Brazil, can prevent, detect, and respond to the pandemic. Doing so can slow or prevent COVID-19 from further spreading. The ultimate goal of the US Army as it supports Brazil is to enhance collaboration in the spirit of cooperation and equality among nations. This will create a post-pandemic world that is more secure, prosperous, and democratic in the Western Hemisphere for both the United States and Brazil.

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