

Specter of hunger rises in Brazil as coronavirus wrecks incomes

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By Gram Slattery and Anthony Boadle

RIO DE JANEIRO/BRASILIA, April 21 (Reuters) - In a brick warehouse on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, dozens of charity workers filled trucks with bags of beans, rice, flour and other staples to be distributed throughout the Brazilian metropolis sprawling slums.

For thousands of residents in Rio - Latin Americas third-largest city - these foodstuffs provided by a non-governmental organization, Citizens Action, are crucial to fend off a plight which could prove as deadly as the novel coronavirus: hunger.

Lockdowns have ravaged the incomes of Brazils poor, throwing many of Brazils 38 million informal workers into unemployment.

Here, as elsewhere across Latin America, an increasing number of people are unsure where they will get their next meal.

In Brazil, huge strides were made to eradicate hunger in the first decade of this century, when one-sixth of the population was lifted out of poverty. For many now in Rio, its return is devastating.

The refrigerator of Rosana de Paula, 37, was empty but for a bottle of water, an eggplant, a wedge of cheese and a piece of pumpkin - all donated by local restaurants.

De Paula scratched a living sorting recyclables from trash at a cooperative in Duque de Caxias, a working-class city on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro.

But when work dried up due to the coronavirus lockdown, so did her income.

"When I was working, the weekend would arrive and the fridge wouldnt be overflowing, but we had enough," said de Paula, who lives with her husband and 8-year-old daughter in a cramped cinder-block home. "But now, its like this," she said, pointing to the bare shelves.

Although there are no national statistics on rising hunger since the pandemic hit, humanitarian groups said they are already scrambling to step up food programs, diverting cash from other areas to rush parcels to people like de Paula.

They warned the new coronavirus will cause hunger on a scale not seen in decades, worsening poverty that was already rising due to cuts to social programs after Brazil slid into a deep, long-lasting recession in 2015 amid a collapse in commodities prices.

The mounting tragedy brought into sharp focus the human cost of lockdowns that health experts said are necessary to slow the spread of the virus.

This crisis is also likely to provide ammunition for President Jair Bolsonaro, who has repeatedly derided hardline social-distancing measures as a "poison", the economic fallout of which could be more dangerous than COVID-19.

Despite Brazil being a top food exporter, nongovernmental organizations said some families have not eaten a meal for two or three days. With the World Bank predicting the economy to shrink by 5% this year, the situation was expected to deteriorate further in one of the worlds most unequal societies.

"We have more than 30 million informal workers in Brazil that were thrown into extreme poverty overnight because they cant work during quarantine," said Kiko Afonso, executive director of Citizens Action, which is distributing hundreds of tons of food throughout Rio and several other Brazilian cities.

"Families with this level of income dont have credit, they dont have savings, and without income, they have absolutely no way to pay for food."

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Brazils Congress approved in late March a monthly cash payment of 600 reais (\$114) to informal workers who have lost their incomes, an emergency program that will cost the government 98 billion reais and benefit 54 million people.

But experts said that will not be enough to feed families sliding into extreme poverty.

The pandemic hit Brazil as Latin Americas largest economy was still struggling to overcome the 2015-2016 recession that resulted in deep cuts to social programs that had pulled 30 million people out of poverty and removed Brazil from the United Nations World Food Program hunger map in 2014.

Over 3 million Brazilians were dragged below the extreme poverty line between 2014 and 2018, according to Marcelo Neri, an expert on social inequality at the Rio think tank FGV Social.

Over 13 million Brazilians were considered to be in extreme poverty at the end of 2019, according to federal statistics agency IBGE.

Experts said that number has ballooned, at least temporarily, by tens of millions.

Caritas, the Catholic relief organization, said poorer Brazilian families were already suffering the impact of austerity policies, and the economic crisis caused by the pandemic made it hard to put food on the table.

The organization is restructuring its programs to focus on the increased demand for food, said Carlos Humberto Campos, Caritas executive director in Brazil.

"There's nothing else to be done," he told Reuters. "Now, it is just about food." (Reporting by Anthony Boadle and Gram Slattery; with additional reporting by Sergio Queiroz and Rodrigo Viga in Rio, additional reporting and editing by Stephen Eisenhammer in Sao Paulo; Editing by Cynthia Osterman)