

Meals parcels arrive in Brazil's favelas as pandemic sparks wave of starvation

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SAO PAULO (Reuters) - Brazil is one of the world's most important agricultural producers, but millions of people in Latin America's biggest country are struggling to put food on the table as the COVID-19 outbreak wreaks havoc on the economy.

To combat growing hunger, a group called G-10 Favelas has begun distributing basic food parcels to slums in the city of Sao Paulo. By the end of this month, 30 thousand tonnes will have been delivered, it says.

The group handed out parcels to Brazilians waiting in long, socially distanced lines in the Heliopolis favela on Wednesday. Among those to receive a parcel was Irami Castro, who said she was thankful for the help.

"I thank God, because today I need it. I am a widow, I have no help, I have nothing," she said.

Brazil has become one of the worst-hit countries in the world by the pandemic, with some 4,000 people a day dying from COVID-19. The healthcare system is on the verge of collapse in Sao Paulo.

The outbreak has created a political crisis for President Jair Bolsonaro, pole-axed Brazil's economy, and caused mounting suffering for the country's poorest residents.

The Getulio Vargas Foundation estimates that 12.8% of Brazil's population — some 27 million people — are now living below the poverty line of 246 reais (\$43) a month, the most since the data series began a decade ago.

Roughly 66 million Brazilians received a government cash transfer program last year. That nearly \$60 billion burst of basic income softened the economic blow of the coronavirus, boosted Bolsonaro's popularity and beat back poverty.

However, it expired at the end of last year. A new aid package, starting this month, will provide four monthly transfers of an average 250 reais to a narrower population.

"This action of food donation in the slum is very important because it is giving the option for these residents to be able to eat for at least one month," said Gilson Rodrigues, the president of the G-10 association. "We are living in a Brazil of hunger."

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