

Families mourn as Brazil kills 400,000 from COVID | News on the coronavirus pandemic

[Clique aqui para ver a notícia no site](#)

São Paulo, Brazil – Nicole Martins had hoped her mother, hospitalized with COVID-19 last month, was on the mend. But when the 24-year-old arrived at the hospital, the look on her father's face confirmed her worst fears.

"I thought she was going out," Martins told Al Jazeera. "But then I got there and saw my dad in tears.

The Martins are among hundreds of thousands of Brazilian families who have lost a loved one to COVID-19 since the coronavirus began to spread across the country like wildfire.

The South American nation surpassed 400,000 coronavirus-related deaths on Thursday, the second-highest total in the world after the United States. More than half of them were recorded in 2021, while April was the deadliest month since the start of the pandemic.

Nicole Martins' mother died of COVID-19 [Avenier Prado/Al Jazeera]

Experts blame several factors for the recent surge, including the more contagious P1 variant, fatigue with restrictive measures such as lockdowns and slow vaccine deployment.

"With 50% of deaths from COVID this year, it shows that the crisis is totally out of control," Jessem Orellana, epidemiologist at the Fiocruz medical research institute in the Amazonian capital of Manaus, told Al Jazeera.

Manaus is where the P1 variant was first detected and where, in January, patients died in their asphyxiated beds due to insufficient oxygen supply.

Brazilian far-right populist President Jair Bolsonaro's response to the crisis, which was to downplay the severity of the disease and cast doubt on masks and vaccines, has been condemned by health experts around the world.

A senatorial commission opened an investigation this week in the government's management of the pandemic.

"We have suffered a lot here with access to information and fake news, as the virus is just a little flu," said Andre Ferreira, a community leader from Brigada Pela Vida (Life Brigade), an NGO that leads awareness activities on COVID-19 in the poor communities of Sao Paulo.

Meanwhile, thousands of families continue to suffer every day as their loved ones die.

In the low-income neighborhood of Fazenda da Juta in Sao Paulo, where the Martins family live, more than five people died from the coronavirus on the same street in March, including Martins' mother.

61-year-old Thalia Novaes' father fought for his life for 30 days and was transferred to three different hospitals before passing away in March. Like many locals, he was buried in the nearby Vila Formosa cemetery, the largest in Latin America, which saw queues for people to be buried.

"We couldn't give him the kind of funeral we wanted," Novaes told Al Jazeera. "There were 12 people before us."

The huge increase in demand led local authorities to install a generator and lights so that burials could take place at night. It also had a physical and mental impact on the burials.

"It's hard to see so many people upset," said eight-year gravedigger James Gomes.

Thalia Naves, whose father died in March, holds baby in Fazenda da Juta neighborhood [Avenier Prado/Al Jazeera]

Socio-economic conditions in Brazil, one of the most unequal countries in the world, continue to be a deciding factor in who bears the brunt of coronavirus deaths.

According to a study published earlier this year in the International Journal of Epidemiology, the death rate per 100,000 inhabitants in the Sapopemba district of Sao Paulo, where Fazenda da Juta is located, is three times higher than in the trendy Pinheiros district.

"Of all the ways a person can work or study safely, it is much more difficult for the poor," said Marcelo Neri, economist at the Brazilian Getulio Vargas Foundation.

The Fazenda da Juta district in the Sapopemba district of Sao Paulo. [Avenier Prado/Al Jazeera]

Returning to Fazenda da Juta, Martins said his father has struggled to cope since his mother's death.

Martins still lives under her parents' house, a common arrangement for many families across Brazil, especially in low-income neighborhoods, and she said she tries to remember better days.

"She was just calling me for things she needed, like garlic, something she forgot to get in stores," Martins said of her mother. "I miss those calls

now.”