

'I had nowhere to go': Brazilians affected by poverty are the most affected by Bolsonaro's pandemic response

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NorthStill not able to face his new life here, he kept his eyes closed. The morning was still too cold, too dark. Beside him, under a black plastic roof, slept a young family he hardly knew. They had been together here for weeks, economic refugees from the coronavirus pandemic, unemployed and evicted, now huddled together to wait for better days to come.

The sky cleared. Zuleide da Conceicao Felix, 67, emerged from her barren shack on the outskirts of the São Paulo metropolitan area. He made coffee on the stove, a treasured relic of his old life, and tried to ignore the cold. An illiterate servant, Felix had led a life of poverty, working the last few years for 170 pounds a month. But even she had never been through something like this.

"My husband and I had a bedroom," she recalled. "We had a living room. We had a television. A kitchen. It was all we needed. "

She looked at the ground.

"Now we're here."

Here: a collection of shacks built on the rubbish-strewn remains of a bankrupt factory, cut off from public transportation, with no running water or a market – yet another new settlement in a profusion of sprawling communities that are now being settled by Brazilians left behind. Homeless by an outbreak that refuses to budge.

These are the people President Jair Bolsonaro said he wanted to protect when he adopted the unorthodox pandemic strategy of doing little to control the spread of the coronavirus. In the face of one of the worst outbreaks in the world, it has undermined almost all containment measures proposed by federal and state officials by appealing to the needs of poor working-class Brazilians. They couldn't stay home, he said. They had to work to survive.

"Hunger is killing many more people than the virus itself," he said in March. "We have to face reality. There is no use running away from what is there. "

But instead of helping the most vulnerable, economists say, Bolsonaro's fatalistic approach has only prolonged the crisis and driven more people into poverty.

Almost one in five Brazilians say they have been stranded with no income. Half the country is struggling to put food on the table. Nineteen million say they are hungry. Unemployment and inequality rates are at record levels. After the government cut a pandemic payments program to the poorest Brazilians, the largest number of Brazilians in a decade fell into extreme poverty, living on less than £ 1.40 a day. The homeless population increased.

"When people are afraid of getting sick, and when people get sick on the scale of Brazil, there is going to be a lot of instability," says Marcelo Neri, an economist at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a university in Rio. of Janeiro. "This has been terrible for the economy, especially for informal workers."

Brazil has now been left with the worst of both worlds: half a million dead, more than anywhere else outside the United States, and millions more out of work.

One of those who was left without work was Felix. His elderly boss told him to stop coming to clean his house after the virus hit. The older woman was concerned that Felix had the illness of crowded buses commuting to work.

I'll call you when things get better, the woman promised Felix.

Pereira had five children, without work and without a home

(The Washington Post by Rafael Vilela)

That was 15 months ago. Things never got better. The virus continues to ravage Brazil. And Felix, who ran out of savings, went three months without paying his rent, was evicted and now lives here among what remains of his possessions, he is still waiting for that call.

Tent towns spring up in a matter of hours.

One was spilled onto the church grounds of a famous tele-evangelist. Another took root on land owned by the state oil company. In Sao Paulo, the largest city in the Western Hemisphere, more than 800 families flocked to an empty container yard. Six hundred more signed up for a space in an empty field next to a favela.

Communities, largely populated by people who have lost their jobs and homes, have come to symbolize the government's failure to protect its poorest citizens from the economic impact of the pandemic. It extended monthly emergency payments of £ 90 to millions of people in need, lifting some families out of poverty, temporarily, but that program was cut back in September and then suspended for months. The government did not ban evictions, as the United States did, nor did it incentivize the hiring of vulnerable poor youth, as the United Kingdom did.

Store towns spring up in a matter of hours

(The Washington Post by Rafael Vilela)

"What has Bolsonaro done to save the economy?" asks Lena Lavinas, an economist at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. "All he did was say, 'Nothing can stop.' This is not a proposal to save the economy. "

Bolsonaro's office did not respond to a request for comment. In public, the president has worried about the public debt. When asked if he should do more to alleviate the suffering, he expressed irritation. "What country in the world has done what we did, with emergency payments?" I ask. "And they are still criticizing, saying they want more."

The new settlements, many of them founded after payments were cut, now fuel one of the longest and most polarized debates in Brazil. Brazil, a country of vast unused spaces and inescapable inequality, has long been a scene of bitter land disputes between landlords and squatters with nowhere else to go. Many of the irregular enclaves, now home to millions, live under constant threat of eviction.

During the pandemic, as people were driven out onto the streets and settlements multiplied, authorities stepped up eviction operations. In Sao Paulo, they eliminated nearly 4,000 people, the highest number in Brazil. Another 3,000 were removed in Manaus, the Amazonian city devastated by the virus. Brazil's Supreme Court this month suspended the moves until the end of the year, enraging Bolsonaro, a fierce defender of landowners.

"It is the end of private property," he declares. "What a terrible decision."

Fixing a light bulb at the Jardim Julieta campsite

(The Washington Post by Rafael Vilela)

But settlements often take shape on vacant lots, which was exactly what a desolate stretch next to an industrial courtyard in northern Sao Paulo looked like to maid Janeide Pereira. She was walking outside her building last June, frantic. She had lost her job. The mother he worked for had said that she wanted to protect her children from possible exposure to the virus. Now Pereira was also on the verge of losing his home.

"I had nowhere to go," he says.

This dusty patch where people fly kites and litter seemed like their best bet. She took out her belongings, hung up a black plastic tarp, and made a new home for her five children. In a matter of hours, he had neighbors. They filled every corner of the city-owned lot. Small wooden houses soon emerged. Running water and electricity were installed by cutting nearby lines. The Jardim Julieta settlement is born.

The people who arrive now, some with injuries from life on the streets, are reluctantly rejected: the community is full. The camp leaders tell them about another place, five miles to the north. There, on the wooded grounds of a bankrupt factory, another settlement is forming.

The Nascido do Sol camp burns

(The Washington Post by Rafael Vilela)

And that's where Felix went.

"Water!" came a scream in the distance. "Water!"

Felix stretched his head and stood up. The community had run out of water the night before. All morning there had been fear that the city's water man, who had been filling his 2,000-liter cistern with the books, had forgotten them.

Felix's husband produced several empty buckets. He handed her one and, laughing, they left, crossing the rubble and garbage that construction companies had left here. They found the water man in front of the community.

"Water!" Felix screamed with joy.

She was trying to be happy here. But more and more he felt his 67 years. His body ached. She was diabetic. And there was so much uncertainty in life in the settlement. The water could stop. People might forget to send them the food donations they survive on. One day he had brought a young family with three young children, one of the 250 families that now crowd the settlement, and now they all share their hut and a light bulb.

"We were evicted," says Andreia Rodrigues de Oliveira, 36, the mother. "We spent three nights sleeping under a tent awning before we found out about this arrangement."

Felix prays for the day that he can go back to work and leave the camp.

(The Washington Post by Rafael Vilela)

Every day Felix waits. When he was about to lose his home, he called his boss. The woman, "really good people," says Felix, bought him a tank of gas and reminded him that he would be in touch when the pandemic passed. But then Felix moved here, where her phone can't get a signal, and she realized that if her boss called, she wouldn't know.

He reached the community tap and watched the water go into the buckets. He weighed them with a grunt and returned to his hut. Things would

get better, she reminded herself. The pandemic would pass. Her boss might call her daughter, her daughter would find her here, and Felix would go back to work.

He left the water. She looked at her new home. He thanked God for what he had. The water had arrived today. And, looking away at the families around her, she knew that she would not be alone. Almost 400 more were expected to arrive in the coming days.

“Every day there are more,” he said.

Heloisa Traiano of the Washington Post contributed to this report.

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