

“I have nowhere to go”: Bolsonaro’s pandemic response hits poor Brazilians hardest

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

Before she could face her new life here, she closed her eyes. It was still too cold in the morning, too dark. Beside her, under the black plastic roof, fell asleep with a young family she hardly knew. They have been together here for several weeks, financially refugee in the coronavirus pandemic, people who are unemployed and deported are now gathering together, hoping for better days.

The sky cleared. 67-year-old Zuleide da Conceicao Felix walked out of her barren hut on the outskirts of the metropolitan São Paulo. She brewed coffee on the stove—a precious relic of her past life—and tried to ignore the cold. As an illiterate maid, Felix leads a poor life, working at a price of 170 pounds a month in the past few years. But even she has never experienced such a thing.

“My husband and I have a bedroom,” she recalled. “We have a living room. We have a TV. A kitchen. This is everything we need.”

She looked at the ground.

“Now we are here.”

Here: a series of shacks built on the rubbish-filled ruins of a bankrupt factory, cut off from public transportation, with no running water or market—yet another new settlement in a large community is now homeless by Brazilians. An explosion that refused to ease.

These people are President Jair Bolsonaro. He said that when he adopted an unorthodox pandemic strategy, he wanted to protect that it would not help to control the spread of the coronavirus. Facing one of the worst epidemics in the world, he weakened almost all containment measures proposed by federal and state officials by meeting the needs of the poor working class in Brazil. He said that they cannot stay at home. They must work to survive.

“Hunger kills more people than virus itself,” he said in March. “We have to face reality. It’s no use escaping from what’s there.”

But economists say Bolsonaro’s fatalism does not help the most vulnerable. Instead, it only prolongs the crisis—and plunges more people into poverty.

Nearly one in five Brazilians said they were trapped without any income. Half of the countries are trying to put food on the table. 19 million people say they are starving. Unemployment and inequality rates have reached record highs. After the government reduced its pandemic payment plan for 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 has exploded.

“When people are afraid of getting sick, when people get sick to the scale they are in Brazil,” said Marcelo Neri, an economist at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a university in Rio de Janeiro. “This is terrible for the economy, especially for informal workers.”

Brazil is now facing the worst of the two worlds: 500,000 deaths—more than anywhere outside the United States—and millions more without jobs.

One of the unemployed is Felix. After the virus arrived, her elderly boss told her not to come to clean her home. The old woman worried that Felix would bring illness from the crowded bus she was riding.

I will call you when things get better, and the woman promises Felix.

Pereira has five children, no job and no home

(The Washington Post by Rafael Villera)

That was 15 months ago. Things never got better. The virus continues to spread in Brazil. Felix—she ran out of savings, hadn’t paid her rent for three months, was evicted, and now lives in the rest of her property—still waiting for the call.

Tent cities emerged within a few hours.

One was sprinkled on the church grounds of a famous TV preacher. The other is rooted in land owned by a state-owned oil company. In São Paulo, the largest city in the Western Hemisphere, more than 800 families poured into an empty container yard. More than 600 people signed up for space on the open space next to the slum.

These communities, mainly composed of people who lost their jobs and homes, have become a symbol of the government’s failure to cushion

its poorest citizens from the economic impact of the pandemic. It provided emergency payments of £90 a month to millions of people in need — to temporarily lift some families out of poverty — but the plan was reduced in September and then suspended for several months. The government did not prohibit evictions like the United States, nor did it encourage the employment of disadvantaged young and poor people like the United Kingdom.

Tent cities emerged in a few hours

(The Washington Post by Rafael Villera)

“What did Bolsonaro do to save the economy?” asked Lena Lavinias, an economist at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. “The only thing he did was to say, ‘There is nothing to 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 been worried about government debt. When asked if he should do more to relieve the pain, he expressed anger. “Which country in the world did what we did with emergency payments?” he asked. “They are still criticizing, saying they want more.”

Many new settlements established after reducing payments are now becoming one of the most protracted and polarizing debates in Brazil. Brazil is a country with vast unused space and inevitable inequality, and has long been a stage for fierce land disputes between landowners and squatters with nowhere to go. Many irregular enclaves now inhabited by millions of people live under the constant threat of being removed.

During the pandemic, as people were expelled to the streets, settlements multiplied and the authorities stepped up demolition operations. In São Paulo, they cleared nearly 4,000 people—the most in Brazil. In Manaus, an Amazon city destroyed by the virus, another 3,000 people were removed. Brazil’s Supreme Court suspended the relocation until the end of this month, angering Bolsonaro, who is determined to defend the landlord.

“This is the end of private property,” he declared. “What a bad decision.”

Repair light bulbs at Jardim Julieta camp

(The Washington Post by Rafael Villera)

But settlements are most often formed in open spaces—this is exactly the desolate place next to the industrial park in the north of São Paulo, according to the maid Jane de Pereira. Last June, she was walking around outside her building, crazy. She lost her job. The mother she works for has stated that she wants to protect her children from possible virus infections. Now Pereira is about to lose her home.

“I have nowhere to go,” she said.

This dusty plot of people flying kites and throwing garbage seems to be her best choice. She dragged out her belongings, set up a black plastic tarp, and built a new home for her five children. Within a few hours, she had neighbors. They filled every corner of all the land in the city. The cabins quickly emerged. Set up tap water and electricity by cutting nearby wiring. The settlement of Jardim Julieta was born.

Those who have arrived now, some have been injured by living on the streets, and they have been turned away reluctantly: the community is full. The camp leader told them another place, five miles to the north. There, in the forest area of ??a bankrupt factory, another settlement is taking shape.

Sunrise camp burning

(The Washington Post by Rafael Villera)

This is where Felix goes.

“Agua!” A shout came from a distance. “Agua!”

Felix raised his head and stood up. The night before, the community ran out of water. Throughout the morning, people have been worried that the city water supply has been pouring water into their 2,000-liter water tank and forgot about them.

Felix’s husband took out a few empty buckets. He handed one to her, and then they giggled and walked away, past the rubble and rubbish left by the construction company. They found the water man in front of the community.

“Agua!” Felix exclaimed happily.

She tries to be happy here. But she is more and more aware of her 67 years old. Her body is aching. She suffers from diabetes. Life in the settlements is full of uncertainty. The water can stop. People may forget to donate the food they depend on for survival. One day, a young family with three young children—one of the 250 families now crowded in this settlement—now they all share her cabin and a light bulb.

“We were expelled,” said 36-year-old mother Andreia Rodrigues de Oliveira. “Before hearing this settlement, we slept under the awning of the store for three nights.”

Felix prays that one day she can return to work and leave the camp

(The Washington Post by Rafael Villera)

Felix waited every day. When she was about to lose her home, she called her boss. This lady—“What a nice person,” Felix said—buy her a can

of gasoline and remind her that she will contact her when the pandemic is over. But then Felix moved here and her cell phone couldn't receive the signal there. She realized that if her boss called, she wouldn't know.

She walked to the faucet in the community and watched the water pouring into the bucket. She muttered and lifted them up, and then went back to her cabin. Things will get better, she reminded herself. The epidemic will eventually pass. Her boss might call her daughter, her daughter will find her here, and Felix will go back to work.

She dropped the water. She looked at her new home. She thanked God for what she had. Today the water has arrived. Moreover, looking at the family around her, she knew that she would not be alone. It is expected that nearly 400 people will arrive in the next few days.

"Every day there is more," she said.

Heloisa Traiano of The Washington Post contributed to this report.

©Washington Post