

Quarantine Brazil Now

by GWYNNE DYER

If I were World Dictator, I would immediately place Brazil under total quarantine: nobody gets in, nobody comes out. And I would keep it isolated until they (a) arrest and jail President Jair Bolsonaro; (b) impose a strict countrywide lockdown for at least two months; and (c) vaccinate everybody in the country (all 213,584,556 of them). And then we'll see.

They'd have to lock Bolsonaro up first because he flatly refuses to do any kind of lockdown. He also regards vaccines as sissy and will not support a national program to vaccinate the population. Some state governors are trying to buy vaccines for their own local populations, but he publicly berates them as cowards for worrying about 'a little flu.'

Bolsonaro is Donald Trump on stilts, and is largely responsible for Brazil's sky-high Covid-19 death rate: more than a quarter-million dead. The United States still holds the lead with half a million deaths ? 1,600 per million compared to Brazil's 1,250 per million ? but the US Covid death-rate is falling fast since President Biden took over, whereas Brazil's is still rocketing up.

Because Brazil's infection rate is so high, it is an ideal pressure-cooker for new and sometimes more dangerous versions of the coronavirus. It already has two named 'variants' of concern. The more recent and more worrisome one, P.1, probably emerged in Manaus, and is now rampant across the Brazilian Amazon.

P.1 is also starting to move out into the rest of the world. Six cases got off the same plane from Brazil in London recently, causing a nationwide scare until they were all tracked down. What makes it so frightening is that it spreads twice as fast as earlier Covid versions ? and it seems able to reinfect people who have already had Covid once.

If it can do that, it can probably also get around the immunity conferred by existing vaccines. There is no evidence of 'community spread' of P.1 in other countries yet ? that is, of infections passing between local people who have not travelled abroad ? but it is only a matter of time unless people stop travelling to and from Brazil.

And what does Jair Bolsonaro say? As Brazil recorded its highest-ever Covid death toll last Thursday, he said: 'Stop whining. How long are you going to keep crying about it? How much longer will you stay at home and close everything? No one can stand it anymore. We regret the deaths, but we need a solution.'

And his 'solution' is to man up, accept half a million or even a million deaths ? and

to impose that solution on everybody else in the world too, because he's certainly not going to shut foreign travel down.

Bolsonaro cannot be reasoned with, and Brazilians cannot really be expected to remove him. Like the sane American majority under Trump, they'd rather endure the madman's blunders and crimes until the end of his term than use force against him and wreck the constitution. But if P.1 spreads, that could mean that everybody else in the world gets lockdowns until the end of the year at least.

Nobody is going to invade Brazil to remove Bolsonaro, although he does pose a big, very real threat. But what everybody else can do is quarantine Brazil. No national or international law stops other countries from banning flights coming out of Brazil from landing on their territory. So do it. Now. No exceptions.

Happily, there are very few heavily travelled road routes out of Brazil, and the country's neighbours have every incentive to shut them down. Maritime trade could continue, so long as every ship leaving Brazil spends at least two weeks at sea before calling at another port (or longer, if any crew develop Covid symptoms).

Even air cargo could be allowed, especially if state governors can buy some vaccines abroad, so long as no passengers are allowed

and air crew are strictly quarantined at both ends of the flight. Nobody wants to punish Brazilians, who are suffering so much under Bolsonaro already. We just don't want him to kill our parents too.

How long should the quarantine last? At least until we understand the real threat from P.1 and other emergent Brazilian variants, have developed vaccines that work against them, and have had time to inoculate our own populations elsewhere. So at least until the end of the year, but considerably longer if the Brazilians don't get their own infection rate under control.

There is a legitimate debate starting to surface about whether we should try to eradicate this coronavirus entirely (like SARS and MERS) or just aim for long-term 'containment' (like the 'flu). This is not about that. It is about avoiding a deadly escalation in the danger. The world can do this quite easily, if it chooses, and Bolsonaro doesn't get a vote.