

## Bolsonaro triggers backlash for downplaying coronavirus

AFP | Brasília

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro drew blistering criticism from the medical community and opponents Wednesday for downplaying the coronavirus pandemic, but renewed his attacks on containment measures to slow its spread.

The far-right leader has repeatedly lashed out at restrictive measures to fight the virus, which he has called a "little flu" that caused an "overblown" reaction.

He triggered new outrage among critics with a national address Tuesday night condemning "scorched-earth" containment measures by local authorities, such as closing businesses and confining people in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's biggest cities.

He said such measures risked wrecking the Brazilian economy, Latin America's largest.

His stance, which flies in the face of World Health Organization recommendations, drew a strongly worded letter of condemnation from a group of eight medical professional associations.

They called Bolsonaro an "enemy of the people's health" whose response to the crisis was "incoherent and criminal."

"He denies the body of scientific evidence guiding the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, dedicating the serious and dedicated work by a national and global network of researchers and health technology professionals," it said.

Politicians of various stripes also attacked Bolsonaro, including center-right Senate president Davi Alcolumbre,



Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro

who said Brazil "needs a serious, responsible leader who cares about the people's lives and health."

Undeterred, Bolsonaro doubled down.

"Companies aren't producing anything. They can't pay their employees... We are facing chaos," he told journalists outside the presidential residence in Brasilia.

"We could end up with problems like people looting supermarkets... What do we need to do? Get people back to work. Protect the elderly, protect people with health problems, but that's it."

Bolsonaro, a former army captain who has been criticized for praising Brazil's brutal military dictatorship (1964-1985), also warned the fallout of the coronavirus crisis could put democracy at risk.

"What if this derails the 'democratic norm' you all defend so staunchly?" he asked, adding: "It wouldn't come from me, don't worry."

He compared his approach to the pandemic to that of US President Donald Trump, whom he admires.

"We're following a similar line," he said.

## Ex-FBI agent missing for 13 years died in Iran custody, family says



Former FBI agent Bob Levinson is seen in 2007, before his disappearance in Iran, in a family photo

AFP | Washington

A former FBI agent who mysteriously vanished in 2007 died in Iranian custody, his family concluded Wednesday, saying US intelligence had made them give up 13 years of hope.

President Donald Trump did not confirm Bob Levinson's death, saying that Iran had not communicated any news on the former agent, who would have turned 72 this month.

But Levinson's family said that it had learned that he was dead, although it gave no information on how or when.

"We recently received information from US officials that has led both them and us to conclude that our wonderful husband and father died while in Iranian custody," the family said in a statement.



A photograph of the captive Bob Levinson released in January 2013 by his wife, who said the image was nearly two years old

"We don't even know when, or even if, his body would be returned to us. This is the very definition of cruelty."

The family said Levinson died before the coronavirus pandemic, which has hit Iran hard and led authorities to release thousands of prisoners temporarily.

The father of seven vanished in March 2007 in Kish, an island that has more lenient visa rules than the rest of Iran, and was said to have been investigating cigarette counterfeiting.

But The Washington Post reported in 2013 that Levinson, who had retired from the FBI, was working for the CIA and had gone on a rogue mission aimed at gathering intelligence on Iran.

It said at the time that the CIA paid \$2.5 million to Levin-



Daniel Levinson, son of Bob Levinson

son's wife Christine, accepting responsibility for his disappearance.

### Years of mystery

Iranian officials have repeatedly said they had no information about Levinson.

In 2010, a videotape of a haggard, bearded Levinson emerged in which he wore an orange jumpsuit of the sort worn by prisoners being held indefinitely at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The footage raised speculation that he may have been held by extremists in Pakistan, but US officials later discounted the possibility.

"I don't accept that he's dead," Trump told reporters when asked about the family's statement.

"They haven't told us that he's dead, but a lot of people are thinking that that is the case," he said.

## Russia to ground all international flights from midnight



Travellers wait for flights to get back home at Moscow's Vnukovo airport  
Moscow

Russia will halt all international flights from midnight today under a government decree listing new measures against the coronavirus outbreak.

The decree published on Thursday orders aviation authorities to halt all regular and charter flights, with the exception of special flights evacuating Russian citizens from abroad.

## Rockets hit Iraq's Green Zone, US-led coalition leaves base

Qayyarah Base | Iraq

Two rockets slammed into the Iraqi capital's high-security Green Zone early yesterday, hours before US-led forces were set to pull out of a second base in the country.

Some 7,500 troops are in Iraq as part of the US-led coalition helping local troops fight jihadist remnants.

The alliance is temporarily bringing some trainers home as a precautionary measure against the coronavirus pandemic and is also leaving other Iraqi bases altogether.

## Fake cures, risky rumours: virus misinformation hits home

AFP | Hong Kong

From being duped into taking poisonous "cures", to watching businesses crumble and avoiding life-saving medication, people are suffering devastating real-world impacts of a deluge of online virus misinformation.

As the new coronavirus that has killed more than 20,000 people causes markets to crash and sets scientists scrambling for a solution, rumours and false claims are fuelling confusion and deepening the economic misery.

The effects can be tragic -- in Iran, one of the hardest-hit countries, more than 210 people died from drinking toxic alcohol after claims circulated online that it could treat or ward off COVID-19, the official Irna news agency reported.

Dangerous fake cures debunked by AFP include consuming volcanic ash and fighting infection with UV lamps or chlorine disinfectants, which health authorities say can harm the body if used incorrectly.

Another remedy that "kills the coronavirus", according to misleading social media posts, is drinking silver particles in liquid, known as colloidal silver.

"I am making colloidal silver now. I have asthma and does it really work... worried/stressed over virus. Does this help if I take a teaspoon a day. New to this..." said a post by a user named Michelle in a pub-



**And a man died in the US from taking a form of chloroquine -- hailed by President Donald Trump as a potential "gift from God" remedy -- after he took a form of the drug his wife had used to treat her pet fish.**

lic Facebook group, alongside a photo of a jar of water with a metal rod in it.

The side effects of taking colloidal silver can include a bluish-grey skin discoloration and poor absorption of some medicines including antibiotics, according to the US National Institutes of Health.

But this has not put some people off. An Australian man who said he regularly buys the concoction said it had "sold out in my town ... but before the virus, I could always get some".

Cocaine and bleach-like solutions are also among the risky fake cures touted online. "No, cocaine does NOT protect against #COVID-19," the French government tweeted in response.

### Businesses hit hard

As panic buying leaves supermarket shelves empty around the world, some Indian traders and farmers have had the opposite problem -- people shunning their products due to false information.

Retailers in Delhi told AFP they had stocked up on Chinese-made goods such as toy guns, wigs and other colourful accessories ahead of Holi festival earlier this month.

But "misinformation about Chinese products -- that they might transmit coronavirus -- caused a downfall in the sales of Holi goods. We witnessed a reduction in sales of around 40



Researchers are working to develop a vaccine for the new coronavirus but theoretical papers on unproven cures have sparked confusion among some of the public

percent compared to previous year", said Vipin Nijhawan from the Toy Association of India.

The World Health Organization has said the virus does not last long on inanimate surfaces, so it is unlikely imported goods would remain infectious even if contaminated.

### Heart meds

The rapid spread of information online means that when scientists discuss as-yet unproven theories, anxious patients can take unnecessary risks.

**Cocaine and bleach-like solutions are also among the risky fake cures touted online.**

Confusion has been sparked by letters and theoretical papers published in scientific journals about whether some types of heart medication can raise the chance of developing a serious form of COVID-19.

This has prompted health authorities across Europe and America to advise heart patients -- already more at-risk for the disease -- to continue taking their drugs.

Carolyn Thomas, who runs a blog for women living with heart disease, said dozens of her readers had contacted her for advice after seeing tweets warning about ACE inhibitors and angiotensin receptor blockers.

"Until I get in to see my own cardiologist, I'm still taking my own drugs, even as I wonder if

they are increasing my own vulnerability to catching the virus," Thomas, who is self-isolating at home in Canada, told AFP.

"I'm afraid to take them, yet I'm afraid to stop," she said.

Professor Garry Jennings, chief medical advisor for Australia's Heart Foundation, said the theoretical papers were "based on a number of factors which are all disputed" and warned that if patients stopped taking their medication there could be an upshot in heart attacks and deaths.

"In the absence of any other evidence that it's actually happening, and with the knowledge that these drugs are beneficial... it's not a good idea to stop," he said.

And a man died in the US from taking a form of chloroquine -- hailed by President Donald Trump as a potential "gift from God" remedy -- after he took a form of the drug his wife had used to treat her pet fish.

The woman told NBC News: "I saw it sitting on the back shelf and thought, 'Hey, isn't that the stuff they're talking about on TV?'"

Banner Health, a non-profit health care provider based in Phoenix, said on its website that "a man has died and his wife is under critical care after the couple, both in their 60s, ingested chloroquine phosphate, an additive commonly used at aquariums to clean fish tanks."