

Brazil confirms Latin America's first coronavirus case

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Brazil's health ministry said on Wednesday a Sao Paulo resident has been diagnosed with the novel coronavirus, the first case recorded in Latin America.

The 61-year-old patient had returned on February 21 from the Lombardy region of Italy, the epicenter of an outbreak in the European country, Brazil's Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta said.

Mandetta said authorities were trying to identify people that had been in contact with the patient as well as around 30 friends and family members.

The man had visited a doctor complaining of flu symptoms. He has been placed in home isolation but is "fine," Sao Paulo Health Secretary Jose Henrique Germann Ferreira said.

Mandetta added that the man had displayed "no symptoms" when he returned last Friday.

Sao Paulo is Brazil's largest city with 12 million inhabitants.

The news comes during carnival season, when swathes of people take to the streets for a giant party while mingling in close proximity.

Brazil is by far the largest country in South America and shares borders with all of the continent's other nations and territories except Chile and Ecuador.

Sao Paulo's stock market fell five percent on Wednesday as it reopened for the first time this week, mirroring tumbling stocks around the world.

Brazil's real also dropped to a historic low of 4.421 to the dollar.

Another 20 cases are under investigation, said health ministry official Wanderson Kleber de Oliveira.

Twelve of those had traveled to Italy while one was in China, the origin of the outbreak.

Before confirming the case, Mandetta had spoken to CBN radio station downplaying the virus as a simple "flu."

"We need to stay calm, it's a flu and we'll overcome it," he said.

However, he added that it was a virus that appeared in a northern hemisphere winter and there was no way to predict how it would react to a southern hemisphere summer.

"It could be better, or worse," he said.

The government has advised people not to panic but to "avoid unnecessary crowds," something that will be hard during carnival, a hugely popular public holiday in Brazil.

Coronavirus has killed over 2,700 people and infected more than 80,000, the vast majority in China.

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