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‘Sanitary refugees’: Paraguayan migrants stranded at the border during COVID-19

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Abstract

Brazil and Paraguay’s widely different approaches to handling the COVID-19 pandemic led to humanitarian tensions at the border. When Paraguayans attempted to return to their country across the Ponte da Amizade, they were denied entry through closed borders and became stuck for days, ‘living’ on the international bridge.

Keywords

Paraguay, Brazil, return, borders, COVID-19

Theme

Shock (im)mobilities

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When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in South America, Paraguay and Brazil chose two very different approaches to deal with it. While Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro minimised the seriousness of COVID-19 and urged state governments to lift mobility restrictions,² Paraguay's government implemented a full lockdown³ and closed its borders, preventing its own citizens from entering the country, even if on foot.⁴ In the following days, a large number of Paraguayans tried to return home after losing their jobs in Brazil due to the pandemic.⁵ However, they had to stay in limbo, stranded on the *Ponte Internacional da Amizade* ('International Friendship Bridge'),⁶ which connects the Brazilian city of Foz do Iguaçu to the Paraguayan city of Ciudad del Este.

Paraguay implemented strict border controls starting on 18 March 2020⁷ and sent soldiers to its borders with Brazil to prevent the entry of cars and buses.⁸ On that day, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro asked his Paraguayan counterpart, Mario Abdo Benítez, to allow Brazilians crossing the border on foot to enter Paraguay. Bolsonaro told reporters that halting the movement of people between the twin cities of Ponta Porã, in Brazil, and Pedro Juan Caballero, in Paraguay, was not possible, adding that closing the borders was 'hysterical' and would not solve the problem.⁹ Bolsonaro's pleas were unsuccessful and, by 24 March, Paraguay had closed its land borders with Brazil, Bolivia and Argentina.¹⁰

² Deutsche Welle. 2020. *Em pronunciamento, Bolsonaro minimiza novo coronavírus* [In a statement, Bolsonaro minimizes the new coronavirus]. 25 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.dw.com/pt-br/em-pronunciamento-bolsonaro-minimiza-novo-coronav%C3%A9rus/a-52906298>. Last accessed 7 July 2020.

³ CNN Brasil. 2020. *Paraguai fecha fronteira com o Mato Grosso do Sul para conter coronavírus* [Paraguay closes the border with Mato Grosso do Sul to contain the coronavirus]. 18 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/internacional/2020/03/18/paraguai-fecha-fronteira-com-o-mato-grosso-do-sul-para-conter-coronavirus>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

⁴ Junqueira, Caio. 2020. *Brasil vê 'refugiados sanitários' em fronteira com Argentina e Paraguai* [Brazil sees 'sanitary refugees' at the border with Argentina and Paraguay]. *CNN Brasil*. 30 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/politica/2020/03/30/brasil-ve-refugiados-sanitarios-em-fronteira-com-argentina-e-paraguai>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

⁵ Portal da Cidade Foz do Iguaçu. 2020. *Mais de 50 paraguaios são impedidos de entrar no país pela Ponte da Amizade* [More than 50 Paraguayans are prevented from entering the country through the Ponte da Amizade]. 9 April 2020. Available online at: <https://foz.portaldacidade.com/noticias/regiao/mais-de-50-paraguaios-vindos-do-brasil-sao-impedidos-de-entrar-no-pais-3714>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Benites, Súzan. 2020. *Paraguai fecha as fronteiras e proíbe a entrada de brasileiros* [Paraguay closes its borders and bans Brazilians from entering]. *Correio do Estado*. 18 March 2020. Available online at: <https://correiodoestado.com.br/cidades/coronavirusparaguaifronteiramsbrasilpontedaamizade/369189>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

⁸ Fernandes, Adriano, and Helio de Freitas. 2020. *Exército inicia fechamento da fronteira de Ponta Porã com Pedro Juan Caballero* [The army starts closing the border between Ponta Porã and Pedro Juan Caballero]. *Campo Grande News*. 18 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.campograndenews.com.br/cidades/interior/exercito-inicia-fechamento-da-fronteira-de-ponta-pora-com-pedro-juan-caballero>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

⁹ Fernandez, Melissa. 2020. *Bolsonaro pede ao Paraguai que libere fronteira para quem estiver a pé* [Bolsonaro asks Paraguay to open the border for those crossing the border on foot]. *Poder 360*. 18 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.poder360.com.br/coronavirus/bolsonaro-pede-ao-paraguai-que-libere-fronteira-para-quem-estiver-a-pe/>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

¹⁰ Infobae América Latina. 2020. *Coronavirus: Paraguay decretó el cierre completo de sus fronteras hasta el domingo* [Coronavirus: Paraguay decrees total closure of borders until Sunday]. 24 March 2020. Available online at: <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2020/03/24/coronavirus-paraguay-decreto-el-cierre-completo-de-sus-fronteras-hasta-el-domingo/>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

On 8 April, Paraguayan security authorities installed a gate at the entrance of the *Ponte da Amizade* in Ciudad del Este, Paraguay.¹¹ The iron barrier was only installed in the Brazil-Paraguay direction, to prevent all pedestrians, Paraguayan and foreign, from entering Paraguay.¹² On 9 April, a group of 51 Paraguayan nationals who arrived at the *Ponte da Amizade* were not permitted to enter their country. According to the Paraguayan Navy, it was unclear when the group would be allowed into Ciudad del Este.¹³

Since Paraguay has a precarious health system and limited resources,¹⁴ Abdo's government chose to prioritise border control.¹⁵ However, border closures and health and safety procedures meant that many Paraguayans were unable to receive a timely authorisation from their government to enter the country as they arrived at the border. As a result, many Paraguayan nationals ended up stranded on the *Ponte da Amizade* for several days.¹⁶

Pandemic refugees 'living' on the *Ponte da Amizade*

Paraguay adopted a standard health procedure, requiring every returnee to quarantine for 14 days¹⁷ before travelling on to their homes.¹⁸ The Paraguayan government expected more than 25,000 Paraguayans to return home during the pandemic, and established dozens of shelters, adapting sports centres and warehouses¹⁹ to quarantine those arriving from abroad.²⁰ However, Paraguay faced

¹¹ RPC Foz do Iguaçu. 2020. Coronavírus: Paraguai bloqueia corredor de pedestres na Ponte da Amizade com barreira de ferro na fronteira com o Brasil [Coronavirus: Paraguay blocks the pedestrian corridor on the Ponte da Amizade with an iron barrier at the Brazilian border]. *GI*. 9 April 2020. Available online at: <https://g1.globo.com/pr/oeste-sudoeste/noticia/2020/04/09/coronavirus-paraguai-bloqueia-corredor-de-pedestres-na-ponte-da-amizade-com-barreira-de-ferro-na-fronteira-com-o-brasil.ghtml>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

¹² Portal da Cidade Foz do Iguaçu. 2020. Paraguai instala portão na Ponte da Amizade para impedir a entrada de pedestres [Paraguay installs a gate on the Ponte da Amizade to prevent pedestrians from entering]. 8 April 2020. Available online at: <https://foz.portaldacidade.com/noticias/regiao/paraguai-instala-portao-na-ponte-da-amizade-para-impedir-a-entrada-de-pedestres-3036>. Last accessed 9 December 2020.

¹³ RPC Foz do Iguaçu. 2020.

¹⁴ Della Coletta, Ricardo. 15 October 2020. Bolsonaro anuncia reabertura de fronteiras terrestres entre Brasil e Paraguai [Bolsonaro announces the reopening of land borders between Brazil and Paraguay]. *Folha de S.Paulo*. 15 October 2020. Available online at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2020/10/bolsonaro-anuncia-reabertura-de-fronteiras-terrestres-entre-brasil-e-paraguai.shtml>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

¹⁵ Freitas, Ricardo. 2020. Presidente do Paraguai diz que Brasil é 'grande ameaça a propagação do coronavírus' e descarta reabrir fronteiras [Paraguayan President says that Brazil is "a great threat to the spread of coronavirus" and rules out reopening borders]. *GI*. 13 May 2020. Available online at: <https://g1.globo.com/ms/mato-grosso-do-sul/noticia/2020/05/13/presidente-do-paraguai-diz-que-brasil-e-grande-ameaca-a-propagacao-do-coronavirus-e-descarta-reabrir-fronteiras.ghtml>. Last accessed 7 December 2020.

¹⁶ Morandi, Marcos. 2020. Paraguai projeta retorno de mais de 25 mil paraguaios por conta da pandemia [Paraguay plans the return of over 25,000 Paraguayans due to the pandemic]. *Jornal Midiamax*. 12 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.midiamax.com.br/mundo/2020/paraguai-projeta-retorno-de-mais-de-25-mil-paraguaios-por-conta-da-pandemia>. Last accessed 7 December 2020.

¹⁷ Portal da Cidade Foz do Iguaçu. 2020.

¹⁸ Carmo, Marcia. 2020. 'É a principal ameaça': situação de pandemia no Brasil gera temor em vizinhos na América do Sul ["It is the main threat": The pandemic situation in Brazil causes fear among its neighbours in South America]. *BBC*. 12 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/portuguese/internacional-52594649>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

¹⁹ Portal da Cidade Foz do Iguaçu. 2020. Paraguaio que estava na Ponte da Amizade dá positivo para o coronavírus [Paraguayans who were on the Ponte da Amizade test positive for coronavirus]. 2 May 2020. Available online at: <https://foz.portaldacidade.com/noticias/regiao/paraguaios-que-estavam-na-ponte-da-amizade-dao-positivo-para-o-coronavirus-4252>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

²⁰ AFP. 2020. Casos de coronavírus importados do Brasil disparam alerta no Paraguai [Coronavirus cases imported from Brazil raise the alarms in Paraguay]. *Diário do Nordeste*. 16 May 2020. Available online at: <https://diarionordeste.verdesmares.com.br/ultima-hora/mundo/casos-de-coronavirus-importados-do-brasil-disparam-alerta-no-paraguai-1.2246299>. Last accessed 7 December 2020.

challenges to repatriate all returnees because the shelters were precarious²¹ and did not have the capacity to timely accommodate all.²² There were also COVID-19 outbreaks in the shelters, which slowed down the process of repatriation even more.



(Photo by Christian Rizzi)

Insufficient quarantine spaces led to long queues on the bridge between the two countries, and some Paraguayans had to spend several days ‘living’ on the bridge,²³ facing rain and cold weather.²⁴

Official information about the accurate number of people stranded on the bridge differed between Brazilian and Paraguayan sources. As overcrowding aggravated the situation on the *Ponte da Amizade*, Brazil’s Federal Highway Police (PRF) reported on 20 April that there were about 81 people at one point trying to return to their country, while the Paraguayan Consulate in Foz do Iguaçu announced that over 150 Paraguayans were waiting to return home. A newspaper reported that there were 200 Paraguayan nationals stuck on the bridge.²⁵ Two days later, one news outlet stated that

²¹ Alves, José Eustáquio Diniz. 2020. Diário da Covid-19: Paraguai mostra o caminho para deter o coronavírus [COVID-19 diary: Paraguay shows the way to stop coronavirus]. *Colabora*. 26 May 2020. Available online at: <https://projetocolabora.com.br/ods3/paraguai-mostra-o-caminho-para-deter-o-coronavirus/>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

²² Morandi, Marcos. 2020.

²³ Folhapress. 2020. Paraguaios que tentam sair do Brasil ficam retidos por dias na ponte da Amizade [Paraguayans trying to leave Brazil are stranded for days on the Ponte da Amizade]. *O Tempo*. 28 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.otempo.com.br/brasil/paraguaios-que-tentam-sair-do-brasil-ficam-retidos-por-dias-na-ponte-da-amizade-1.2330549>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

²⁴ Portal da Cidade Foz do Iguaçu. 2020. Na Ponte da Amizade, paraguaios barrados pelo governo enfrentam frio e chuva [On the Ponte da Amizade, Paraguayans barred by the government face the cold and the rain]. 2020. Available online at: <https://foz.portaldacidade.com/noticias/regiao/na-ponte-da-amizade-paraguaios-barrados-pelo-governo-enfrentam-frio-e-chuva-1728>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

²⁵ Teles, João Carlos Magalhães. 2020. Paraguai abre exceção e cidadãos barrados na Ponte da Amizade conseguem entrar no país após dias de espera [Paraguay makes an exception and the citizens stranded on the Ponte da Amizade manage to enter the country after days of waiting]. *Jornal de Brasília*. 22 April 2020. Available online at: <https://jornaldebrasil.com.br/noticias/mundo/paraguai-abre-excecao-e-cidadaos-barrados-na-ponte-da-amizade-conseguem-entrar-no-pais-apos-dias-de-espera/>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

more than 100 Paraguayans were waiting on the bridge,²⁶ while another outlet said about 300 Paraguayans were there around the same time.²⁷

The Paraguayan government eventually made an exception and allowed some groups of Paraguayans to enter the country as the bridge became increasingly overcrowded.²⁸ However, those who were still arriving at the *Ponte da Amizade* did not know whether or when they would be able to return home.²⁹ Moreover, Paraguayans who had left Brazil and crossed the bridge into the Paraguayan side were not allowed to return to São Paulo or other regions of Brazil, due to the mobility restrictions imposed by Brazilian authorities.³⁰

Brazilian diplomats categorised those stranded on the bridge as ‘sanitary refugees’, pointing out that Paraguay’s measures were not in accordance with humanitarian principles³¹ as some Paraguayans were ‘living’ on the pedestrian pathway over the Paraná river.³² According to Brazilian authorities, Paraguayan nationals stuck on the bridge were permitted to use the bathroom and drink water at Brazilian customs in Foz do Iguaçu.³³ The Paraguayan Navy also provided water, food, and access to toilets to those waiting; nevertheless, it was reported that many Paraguayans staying on the bridge did not have masks, hand sanitiser, or suitable conditions to maintain hygiene.³⁴ Brazilian volunteers helped them access hygiene services and food as well.³⁵

Gradually reopening the borders

On 16 September, Brazil and Paraguay signed a bilateral act allowing trade to partially resume between the border cities of Foz do Iguaçu and Ciudad del Este, Mundo Novo and Salto del Guairá, and Ponta Porã and Pedro Juan Caballero.³⁶ This agreement to reopen borders and potentially save

²⁶ Teles, João Carlos Magalhães. 2020.

²⁷ AFP. 2020. Paraguai aponta 'situação caótica' no Brasil e vai esperar para reabrir fronteira [Paraguay points out the “chaotic situation” in Brazil and will wait to reopen the border]. *UOL*. 5 June 2020. Available online at: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/ultimas-noticias/afp/2020/06/05/paraguai-aguarda-reducao-da-onda-de-infecoes-no-brasil-para-reabrir-fronteira.htm>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

²⁸ RPC Foz do Iguaçu. 2020. Paraguaios que estavam retidos na Ponte da Amizade são levados a abrigo no Paraguai [Paraguayans stranded on the Ponte da Amizade are taken to a shelter in Paraguay]. *GI*. 11 April 2020. <https://g1.globo.com/pr/oeste-sudoeste/noticia/2020/04/11/paraguaios-que-estavam-retidos-na-ponte-da-amizade-conseguem-voltar-ao-pais-de-origem.ghtml>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

²⁹ Teles, João Carlos Magalhães. 2020.

³⁰ RPC Foz do Iguaçu. 2020.

³¹ Junqueira, Caio. 2020.

³² Morandi, Marcos. 2020. Paraguaios fogem da pandemia no Brasil e acabam “morando” sobre a Ponte da Amizade [Paraguayans flee the pandemic in Brazil and end up “living” on the Ponte da Amizade]. *Jornal Midiamax*. 24 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.midiamax.com.br/cotidiano/2020/paraguaios-fogem-da-pandemia-no-brasil-e-acabam-morando-sobre-a-ponte-da-amizade>. Last accessed 7 December 2020.

³³ RPC Foz do Iguaçu. 2020.

³⁴ Baran, Katna. 2020. Paraguaios que tentam sair do Brasil ficam retidos por dias na Ponte da Amizade [Paraguayans trying to leave Brazil are stranded for days on the Ponte da Amizade]. *Folha de S.Paulo*. 28 April 2020. Available online at: https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mundo/2020/04/paraguaios-que-tentam-sair-do-brasil-ficam-retidos-por-dias-na-ponte-da-amizade.shtml?aff_source=56d95533a8284936a374e3a6da3d7996. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

³⁵ Itaipu Binacional – Governo do Brasil. 2020. *Covid-19: Voluntários que levam comida e banho aos paraguaios parados na Ponte da Amizade serão testados* [COVID-19: Volunteers bringing food and hygiene items to stranded Paraguayans on the Ponte da Amizade will be tested]. Available online at: <https://www.itaipu.gov.br/sala-de-imprensa/noticia/covid-19-voluntarios-que-levam-comida-e-banho-aos-paraguaios-parados-na-pon>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

³⁶ Brandão, Marcelo. 2020. Brasil e Paraguai reabrem parcialmente suas fronteiras para comércio [Brazil and Paraguay partially reopen their borders to trade]. *Agência Brasil*. 16 September 2020. Available online at: <https://agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/economia/noticia/2020-09/brasil-e-paraguai-reabrem-parcialmente-suas-fronteiras-para-comercio>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

jobs³⁷ also included the condition that both countries would maintain some mobility restrictions and implement health measures to contain the spread of coronavirus.³⁸

After being closed for almost seven months, the *Ponte Internacional da Amizade* started to gradually reopen. To prepare for this, the city of Foz do Iguaçu created a contingency plan and requested the Brazilian Ministry of Health to expand the capacity of the city's Intensive Care Unit as they expected that Paraguayans would seek medical care there. Furthermore, the city requested the federal government to assist in implementing a mobile health unit on the Brazilian side of the *Ponte da Amizade*.³⁹ As movement across the bridge partially resumed, Paraguay also implemented a health protocol establishing that vehicles could only cross the bridge between 5 am and 2 pm,⁴⁰ while pedestrian movement remained prohibited for an additional 15 days.⁴¹

The Paraguayan government took another step towards reopening its borders on 30 October 2020, allowing pedestrians to walk across the border between Brazil and Paraguay. The only remaining restriction was that non-Paraguayan nationals would only be allowed to access up to 30 km into Paraguay from the border.⁴² Non-residents and tourists wishing to travel further into the country now have to go through immigration control procedures and follow the sanitary requirements of the Ministry of Public Health.⁴³ Upon arrival, these travellers are also required to fill out a form with their health information, vaccination background, COVID-19 test result, and the address where they would be staying for 21 days.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the 14-day quarantine requirement for all people entering Paraguay has remained in place throughout the pandemic.⁴⁵

Paraguayan poet Augusto Roa Bastos once wrote that Paraguay is '*una isla rodeada de tierra*' ('an island surrounded by land')⁴⁶ in the heart of the continent. For the land-locked 'island', Brazil

³⁷ RPC Foz do Iguaçu and G1 PR. 2020. Fechada desde março por causa do coronavírus, Ponte Internacional da Amizade é reaberta em Foz do Iguaçu [Closed since March because of coronavirus, the Ponte Internacional da Amizade reopens in Foz do Iguaçu]. *G1*. 15 October 2020. Available online at: <https://g1.globo.com/pr/oeste-sudoeste/noticia/2020/10/15/fechada-desde-marco-por-causa-do-coronavirus-ponte-internacional-da-amizade-e-reaberta-em-foz-do-iguacu.ghtml>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

³⁸ Della Coletta, Ricardo. 2020.

³⁹ RPC Foz do Iguaçu and G1 PR. 2020.

⁴⁰ Redação Tarobá News. 2020. *Paraguai divulga protocolo para reabertura gradual da Ponte da Amizade no dia 15* [Paraguay announces a protocol for the gradual reopening of the Ponte da Amizade on 15 (October)]. 12 October 2020. Available online at: <https://tarobanews.com/noticias/parana/paraguai-divulga-protocolo-para-reabertura-gradual-da-ponte-da-amizade-no-dia-15-1M04L.html>. Last accessed 10 December 2020.

⁴¹ Portal da Cidade Foz do Iguaçu. 2020. *Dia histórico na fronteira. Ponte da Amizade reabre e anima negócios na região* [Historical day at the border. The Ponte da Amizade reopens and reactivates businesses in the region]. 15 October 2020. Available online at: <https://foz.portaldacidade.com/index.php/noticias/regiao/dia-historico-na-fronteira-ponte-da-amizade-reabre-e-anima-negocios-na-regiao-5610>. Last accessed 8 December 2020.

⁴² Portal da Cidade Foz do Iguaçu. 2020. *Paraguai acaba com horário restrito e libera passagem de pedestres na fronteira* [Paraguay ends time restrictions and allows pedestrians to cross the border]. 29 October 2020. Available online at: <https://foz.portaldacidade.com/noticias/regiao/paraguai-acaba-com-horario-restrito-e-libera-passage-de-pedestres-na-fronteira-3048>. Last accessed 11 December 2020.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ministerio de Salud Pública y Bienestar Social de Paraguay. 2020. *Ficha de declaración de salud del viajero* [Traveller's Health Information]. Available online at: http://dgvs.mspbs.gov.py/webdgvs/views/paginas/vista_viajeros_nor.html. Last accessed 11 December 2020.

⁴⁵ Ministerio de Salud Pública y Bienestar Social de Paraguay. 2020. *Procedimiento sanitario para ingreso y egreso de personas a través de los pasos fronterizos terrestres habilitados, en el contexto de la pandemia por COVID-19* [Sanitary procedure for the entry and exit of persons through authorised land border crossings, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic]. Available online at: <https://www.mspbs.gov.py/dependencias/portal/adjunto/0a7e3c-IngresoyegresoPasosFronterizos.pdf>. Last accessed 11 December 2020.

⁴⁶ Roa Bastos, Augusto. 1986. Paraguay: una isla rodeada de tierra [Paraguay: an island surrounded by land]. *El Correo de la UNESCO*. Available online at: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000069117_spa. Last accessed on 20 December 2020.

represented the greatest threat during the COVID-19 pandemic⁴⁷ as President Jair Bolsonaro consistently downplayed the seriousness of the situation. Therefore, Paraguay adopted strict border restrictions. Nevertheless, neither Paraguay nor Brazil were prepared to timely accommodate Paraguayan nationals who ended up stuck on the *Ponte da Amizade* and unable to go either way for several days.

⁴⁷ Carmo, Marcia. 2020.