News

Funeral service workers, wearing protective clothing, prepare to remove the body of Adamor Mendonca, 75, from his home in Manaus, Brazil, Jan. 16, 2021. According to relatives, Mendonca died from COVID-19 at home after they could not find a vacancy or oxygen at health facilities. (CNS/Reuters/Bruno Kelly)

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With the news that dozens of people were suffocating to death due to a lack of oxygen in hospitals in the Amazon city of Manaus, Catholic bishops made a plea for the supply of an essential element for survival.

"We, bishops of Amazonas and Roraima, make an appeal: For the love of God, send us oxygen," Archbishop Leonardo Steiner of Manaus said in a video released Jan. 15.

"Provide oxygen. People cannot continue to die for lack of oxygen and for lack of beds in the ICUs," said the visibly shaken archbishop.

The archbishop said that during the first wave of COVID-19 in the Amazon region, people died due to a lack of information and lack of beds in Intensive Care Units. Now, during this second wave, people are dying not only because of overcrowded hospitals but from a shortage of oxygen.

The situation in Manaus made headlines as family members of those in hospitals, with COVID-19 and other ailments, were shown trying desperately to purchase oxygen cylinders to save their loved ones.

As of Jan. 15, more than 60 premature infants were said to be in danger of dying for lack of oxygen. Oxygen tanks provided by the federal government were expected to last only days.

During the weekend of Jan. 16-17, hundreds of patients were airlifted to other states for treatment as oxygen supplies continued to diminish.

The plea made by Steiner, who was secretary-general of the Brazilian bishops' conference between 2011 and 2019, was followed by appeals and promises of help from other Brazilian bishops.

Bishop Walmor Oliveira de Azevedo, president of the bishops' conference, asked business leaders, entrepreneurs and politicians to offer their assistance.

"In view of the very serious situation in the city of Manaus, it is urgent to call upon Christians and all sensitive people faced with the suffering of others; it is time to help," he said.

Retired Bishop Erwin Kräutler, president of the Brazilian branch of the Pan-Amazonian Church Network, also expressed his support for the bishops' calls for help and asked local and federal governments to provide oxygen cylinders for hospitals in Manaus and the Amazon.

"We are seeing our sisters and brothers die of suffocation; a terrible death," said the bishop, known for his work with the Indigenous population of the Amazon.

"It is not possible for Brazil to forget the peoples of the Amazon at such a cruel time and to close our ears to the clamor of people who are dying; and [to] their families and health professionals, who cannot care for patients due to lack of oxygen and have to look passively as patients die, suffocated by lack of oxygen, in terrible conditions," said Kräutler.

"For the love of God and of Our Lady: Manaus, the Amazon, are [part of] Brazil. Please wake up, for the people who live here and want to survive this pandemic," he said.

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