

Threats to the protection of Indigenous Peoples

living in isolation or initial contact in Brazil

The Brazilian Amazon has the largest number of peoples living in isolation and initial contact in the world. Their livelihoods and territories are under pressure, threatened by forest depredation, mining, agribusiness, infrastructure projects and extremist missionaries. The situation has deteriorated under the government of Jair Bolsonaro and with the arrival of the pandemic. The mobilization of Indigenous and civil society organizations is essential to resist setbacks in the protection of these peoples.

By Conrado Octavio - 1st July 2021

The Brazilian Amazon is home to the largest number of Indigenous Peoples living in isolation or initial contact known on the planet. The National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) has recorded 114 reports of Indigenous Peoples living in voluntary isolation: 28 with a confirmed presence and the remaining in the investigative stage. In addition, there are more than 20 Indigenous Peoples in initial contact. Their different isolation strategies and the selectiveness of their exchanges with other groups are a response to the violent colonization process experienced by the American continent and the deep transformations that their territories and networks of relationships suffered as a consequence.

Today, their livelihoods and territories are being threatened by expanding extractivism and agribusiness, infrastructure projects, religious proselytism, drug trafficking and smuggling, plus the risk of disease transmission. Since President Jair Bolsonaro came to office, incursions onto their lands have become institutionalized as government policy, jeopardizing the protection and very survival of Indigenous Peoples in isolation and initial contact.

Re-democratization: a path to protecting the peoples living in isolation

With the return of democracy in 1985, organized civil society and FUNAI officials changed the direction of public policy towards isolated peoples. After countless contacts throughout the 20th century promoted by the State, [which led to the extinction of various Indigenous Peoples](#), a new framework was proposed by which to institutionalize their protection. These fundamental guidelines were founded on respect for the peoples' choice to remain in isolation and on protection of their territories.

The practices that had been in place up to that point to contact peoples or groups in isolation were therefore re-directed towards actions aimed at locating, monitoring and protecting their territories while respecting their refusal to establish permanent contact. The results of this process were notable: progress in research and in the systematization of information on these peoples, an expansion of permanent actions to protect their territories in the Brazilian Amazon and the legalization of Indigenous territories with a confirmed presence of isolated peoples.

In terms of post-contact policies and promotion of the rights of peoples in initial contact, however, progress was more timid. Even so, gradual improvements in strategies and planning, plus prevention and contingency measures in relation to possible contact situations, outbreaks and epidemics resulted in important changes. Along the same lines, another positive change was the production of specific programmes with some peoples, respecting and valuing their wishes, their territoriality, their way of life and their processes for knowledge transmission.

Unfortunately, this progress did not take place uniformly across all regions with the presence of Indigenous Peoples in isolation and in initial contact, and nor were these changes sufficient to reverse the violations of their rights that had already occurred.

Challenges facing and limitations to the State's policy of protection

Of the 86 reports that have yet to be confirmed, 35 are located outside of recognized Indigenous territories. Of these, 17 were found in regions with high rates of deforestation,

areas also being affected by infrastructure projects in the states of Mato Grosso, Maranhão, Pará and Rondônia.

A study conducted by [the Socio-Environmental Institute in 2019](#) identified 56 infrastructure projects that were having an impact on 28 Indigenous territories, 13 federal conservation units, four state conservation units and five unprotected areas in which 67 cases of isolated Indigenous Peoples had been reported (nine of them already confirmed). The same study revealed that, as of 2018, nearly 900,000 hectares of land had been deforested in areas with a presence of Indigenous Peoples living in isolation. In addition, it warned that half of the 28 confirmed cases of the presence of isolated Indigenous Peoples in Brazil were suffering unlawful pressures or were being affected by mining interests.

Even where land tenure regulations and territorial monitoring led to reduced pressure, changes in the dynamics of occupation in territories shared between isolated and contacted Indigenous Peoples imposed new challenges. The growing number of reports of the presence of isolated people near contacted villages and of sightings in different regions of the Amazon had already highlighted the risk of contact and conflict back in the early 2000s, along with the need to improve protection policies.

Between 2014 and 2019, five different contact processes occurred: with groups of the Korubo people in the Yavari Valley in 2014, 2015 and 2019; with Awá in Maranhão in 2014; and an initial contact with the Xinane, in Acre, also in 2014. In addition to the warnings issued by communities and organizations, the limitations of the policies being implemented and the need to strengthen FUNAI's and Indigenous participation in public protection policies can clearly be seen: not only in terms of providing information or collaborating on field activities but in the discussion, formulation, decision-making and implementation of strategies aimed at protecting these peoples.

The Brazilian State's lack of institutional interest or of openness to dialogue meant that, until just a few years ago, the protection of peoples living in isolation formed only a negligible area of work within the context of the wider gains made by Indigenous rights in the country.

In addition, this vacuum contributed to making Indigenous strategies on isolation and contact virtually invisible.

In the Mamoadate and Kaxinawá Indigenous Lands on the Humaitá River, the Manchineri and Huni Kuin have for years now been adopting different strategies by which to manage the territory they share with Indigenous Peoples in voluntary isolation: monitoring their presence; coming to agreements between communities not to use areas occupied by isolated peoples; raising awareness among neighbouring non-indigenous communities; and instigating indirect communication and exchanges with isolated peoples. In Maranhão, under intense pressure from loggers, [the Guajajara of the Caru and Araribóia territories created the “Guardiões”](#), groups dedicated to monitoring and protecting the territory they share with the isolated Awá.

In recent years, [dialogue and cooperation with the State aimed at protecting and promoting the rights of isolated Indigenous Peoples has yielded significant results](#). This process came to a halt when Jair Bolsonaro was elected president, however. All the progress achieved in recent decades is now under serious threat due to the current situation in Brazil, which is the most hostile to Indigenous rights since the civil-military dictatorship of the 1960s-1980s.

Resisting the scorched earth project of death

Since taking office in 2019, President Bolsonaro has delegated the management of indigenist, environmental, human rights and land policies to the most radical landowning and evangelical sectors, despite a clear conflict of interest. In addition, countless [positions in the federal administration have been allocated to the military](#), many of whom do not have the technical know-how or experience to do the job.

In this context, the Federal Government's performance in the face of COVID-19 has been calamitous: [thousands of cases of infection and deaths among Indigenous people in initial contact](#) and among populations surrounding the territories of isolated peoples that could have been avoided. The administrative acts of [the Federal Government, together with the measures promoted by Bolsonaro's lawmakers in Congress](#) (much disputed Bill No. 490 being

one clear example), are weakening the Indigenous territories, promoting the presence of missionaries and encouraging other invaders.

Law 14,021, laying down measures to prevent and combat COVID-19 in the Indigenous territories, is in violation of the peoples' fundamental rights as it provides for the establishment of religious missions in areas with a confirmed presence of Indigenous Peoples living in isolation and initial contact. In addition, FUNAI's Regulatory Instruction No. 09 [facilitates the illegal occupation, grabbing and sale of Indigenous lands](#), including those occupied by isolated people, such as the Piripkura and [Ituna-Itatá](#) Indigenous Lands.

In the little more than two years since Bolsonaro has been in office, there has been a proliferation of invasions, conflicts, illegal mining, and the burning and deforestation of lands with the presence of isolated Indigenous groups. The [mass invasion of "garimpeiros" \[gold prospectors\] onto the Yanomami territory](#), the timber exploration in the Araribóia territory, and the [increased deforestation and land grabbing in the Piripkura](#), Ituna-Itatá and Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau territories are just some of the most critical situations right now.

The actions of Indigenous and civil society organizations have been decisive in confronting these attacks and setbacks, both in the territories and through legal actions and national and international political advocacy. One such measure was the action filed in the Federal Supreme Court by the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) and six political parties, calling on the Federal Government to protect Indigenous Peoples in the face of the pandemic. The [Allegation of Non-Compliance with Fundamental Precept No. 709](#) called for the creation of sanitary barriers in territories with the presence of isolated people, the eviction of invaders and the establishment of an emergencies coordinating committee to manage actions to combat the pandemic.

In Amazonas state, [a civil action by the Union of Indigenous Peoples of the Yavari Valley](#) succeeded in containing the entry of missionaries onto a territory that is home to the largest concentration of isolated Indigenous Peoples in Brazil. For its part, the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon [is continuously monitoring cases of](#)

[COVID-19 among Indigenous people](#), publishing regular reports and offering support to combat the pandemic in the territories.

These initiatives are helping to address the escalation in violations and atrocities that has been promoted by the current government's actions and omissions, which are jeopardizing the lives of Indigenous Peoples living in isolation and initial contact. Indigenous Peoples will continue to resist, as they have done over the centuries. Their resistance needs the support of all those who are opposed to the project of death and destruction that is currently reigning in the country.

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