Venezuela: isolated indigenous people, illegal groups, and Covid-19

The Jödi, the Yanomami and the Uwottüja living in voluntary isolation are threatened by the invasions that result from extractive activities and by the presence of illegal groups in the area: to the environmental impact we should add the sociocultural and sanitary ramifications. The isolated groups are aware that foreign agents are potential disease carriers, which represents a motivation to remain isolated. The Covid-19 pandemic worsens this situation due to the high epidemiological and immunological vulnerability.

By Luis Jesús Bello - July 1st, 2021

Three indigenous peoples live in voluntary isolation or initial contact in the Venezuelan Amazon: the Jödi people in the Maigualida mountains, the Yanomami groups in areas of difficult access in the Amazonas and Bolivar States, and the Uwottüja, near the Colombian border. The forest, the mountains, the tepuis, the wild animals, and the springs provide the necessary geographic and environmental conditions for these communities to survive without having to contact non-indigenous people.

According to the 2011 census, the Jödi amount to 400 people living in isolation or initial contact, out of a total of 982. Most of them belong to two communities: Caño Iguana (in Amazonas) and San José de Kayamá (in Bolivar). Moreover, the Yanomami groups in initial contact total 4,000 people out of 13,231 members. Finally, the Uwottüja in voluntary isolation are organized in small communities of between 150 and 200 people, with a total of 19,294 members.
The invasion of illegal groups

These groups have similar epidemiological characteristics and a high immunological vulnerability due to the particular sociocultural, sanitary and geographical conditions of the areas where they live. These conditions are worsened since the territories are being occupied and invaded by illegal external groups that make a serious environmental, sociocultural, and sanitary impact: dissidents of the Colombian guerrilla, illegal miners, smugglers, drug traffickers, and the mafia. Besides being potential disease carriers, these groups are destroying indigenous habitats in the Venezuelan Amazon area through deforestation, rerouting the course of rivers, sedimentation processes that affect river ecosystems, and pollution due to toxic substances.

Sociocultural and sanitary impacts cause cultural changes in the way the communities are organized internally, their traditional authority systems, the exercise of their autonomy, their traditional economic activities, their communal values, their peaceful cohabitation, their cultural identity; it causes the destruction of their sacred places, the division of communities due to alleged benefits, and confrontation and violence among communities.

Armed external groups want to acquire political, economic and military control of indigenous territories, thus violating the rights to self-determination, internal organization, and self-government recognized in the legal system. To achieve it, they carry out gold, diamond and coltan extraction and commercialization activities, fuel trafficking, goods and drugs smuggling, among other illegal activities.

At the Brazilian border, in the Amazonas and Roraima States, the indigenous territories have been invaded by thousands of garimpeiros (miners). According to some reports, there are 20,000 miners on Yanomami lands carrying diseases such as malaria, measles, hepatitis, and Covid-19.
This is how external agents endanger the health of isolated indigenous peoples. This situation is worsened by the new mining policy of the Venezuelan State and the mining megaproject Orinoco Mining Arc (being built in the Bolivar State), with regional implications.

**The arrival of Covid-19 and the need of constitutional recognition**

The pandemic threatens the health and life of isolated indigenous peoples unless measures are taken to control the access to those places neighboring their territories. The projections made for coronavirus and indigenous peoples in the Amazon indicated high rates of morbidity and mortality. According to the Coordination of the Indigenous Organisations of the Amazon Basin (in Spanish, COICA), in 2020 more than 6,000 indigenous people got infected, close to 600 died, and 100 communities were affected. Moreover, the ORPIA-Wataniba Observatory, in its Bulletin No. 23 regarding Covid-19 in the Venezuelan Amazon, recorded 3,631,656 cases and 117,352 deaths in the Pan-Amazon area. In 2021, 10,482 cases have been registered.

Official information about Covid-19 and indigenous peoples in Venezuela and the Amazon is no longer provided. Consequently, the only available information comes from journalists and regional authorities. Taking into account the population density, cases that are potentially indigenous have been reported in the Amazon states: 50% in the Amazonas State, 27% in the Bolivar State, and 25% in the Delta Amacuro State. With a weakened immune system and the advance of illegal mining, the only effective protection measure is to guarantee the continuity of their isolation.

Regarding the recognition by the Venezuelan State, the existence of indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation or initial contact had always been denied. This view, held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other Ministries, changed in 2010: thanks to the awareness work done by social, environmental, and indigenous organizations trying to evidence the existence of these three isolated peoples, they were finally recognized by the State.
Since 2013, the reports by the Office of the Public Defender mention the existence of isolated and initial contact indigenous peoples, the threats and the risks they face. Additionally, in 2019, the Office proposed to the Constituent Assembly the possibility to include a section that acknowledged isolated indigenous people and specific measures for their protection in the new constitutional text.

**External groups as disease carrier agents**

In the case of the Jödi, the anthropologist and investigator Eglee Zent points out that the indigenous strategy of voluntary isolation is based on the fact that all foreign agents are potential disease carriers. Moreover, there is not sufficient information regarding the presence of external armed groups or their contact with the isolated Jödi groups. The expert believes that if Covid-19 reached the isolated communities, the situation would be disastrous due to their epidemiological fragility.

Since one of the most dangerous weaknesses endured by the isolated Jödi, Yanomami and Uwottüja are the respiratory diseases, the coronavirus would increase complications and deaths. The problem is worsened due to the deficiencies in the health system in the Amazon area, the lack of medication and supplies, and the problems with fuel and transportation. However, the rivers, the isolation and the difficulties to access the region became obstacles and mechanisms to control the entrance of foreign agents. Furthermore, the nucleated Jödi communities (those who live in contact with non-indigenous society) got to know about coronavirus through the radio and some groups were divided in many smaller settlements, each one isolated from the other, to prevent infection.

Experts in tropical diseases and health care in areas of difficult access warn that it is much more possible for the virus to reach the Yanomami territory in Venezuela through Brazil because of the strong presence of miners. Additionally, they assume there could be many more deaths in total caused by malaria, pneumonia, or other infectious diseases that are as serious as Covid-19 but that are not being included because of the lack of epidemiological
reports in the area. The situation worsens due to deficient health services in Alto Orinoco, neglect, lack of medical personnel, and shortage of resources.

Moreover, the anthropologist Alexander Mansutti mentions that the situation of the Uwottüja people is complicated on the border between Venezuela and Colombia, with infections and sick people on both countries. That is why it is important to know the development of the pandemic in order to take preventive measures in big towns, where the risk of infection is present and would allow the expansion of the disease to smaller communities. To avoid the pandemic to reach the isolated groups, it is necessary to raise awareness among the relatives who live in the cities and settlements so they avoid visiting refuge area in the river headwaters.

**How do we protect those groups living in voluntary isolation?**

It is necessary for the Venezuelan State to create a clear and effective policy to control the entrance to the indigenous peoples’ territories by illegal external groups. Specialists and indigenous organizations have reported the presence of miners, guerrilla dissidents, drug traffickers, and smugglers on several occasions.

With this objective in mind, there should be the possibility to create protocols of previous, free and informed consultation together with the indigenous peoples. This would guarantee the protection of areas where isolated groups are.

At a regulatory level, it is essential to acknowledge the presence of groups living in isolation and the need to adopt special measures so their territories remain intangible as well as the safety areas that prevent external agents from entering and endangering their survival.

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