Bolsonaro's government strategy
to make Indigenous Peoples disappear in Brazil

The National Indian Foundation is an active agent of a political strategy to expose peoples in voluntary isolation to contact with outsiders. The Piripkura people, the Pirititi Indigenous Land and the Ituna Itatá Indigenous Land demonstrate the connivance of the indigenist body with the economic and political power that seeks to profit from their natural resources: agribusiness, logging and illegal mining.

By Ricardo Verdum - June 1st 2022

During his three years in office, Jair Bolsonaro’s policies aimed at Indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation in the Brazilian Amazon have had a specific objective: to facilitate ethnic cleansing in the territories they inhabit. To this end, any evidence justifying the need to protect them from those who want, legally or illegally, to occupy, explore and commercialize these areas and their natural resources was systematically eliminated.

Of the 120 records of the presence of Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation in the Brazilian Amazon, 28 are confirmed and 92 are being studied to confirm their presence. The records are distributed in 86 territories: 54 Indigenous territories, 24 conservation units (15 federal and nine state) and eight areas without any legal or administrative protection mechanism.

Currently, there are seven Indigenous Lands with Land-Use Restrictions (RU) that were created for the protection of Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation. Below, we will discuss three situations that demonstrate a strategy of programmed exposure of isolated Indigenous peoples. As can be seen, the Bolsonaro government promotes the contact of communities with external social groups through free access to their territories.
The advance on the lands of Indigenous Peoples in voluntary isolation

In the state of Mato Grosso, the Piripkura people have been waiting since the 1980s for their territory to be definitively demarcated, approved and protected by the Brazilian state. It was only on September 30, 2008 that National Indian Foundation (Fundação Nacional do Índio, FUNAI) published the first ordinance establishing the restriction of access to third parties and the use of an area of 243,000 hectares. The last renewal of the ordinance, on March 17, 2022, dictated a validity period of only six months, which was not enough time for FUNAI to conclude the delimitation and for the Presidency to homologate it.

Meanwhile, the pro-Bolsonaro National Indian Foundation resists the demarcation process and confrontations between FUNAI, the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, Indigenous organizations, Indigenous foundations and human rights organizations continue in the legal sphere. In the territory, agribusiness, loggers and squatters are advancing into the interior of the Indigenous Land: they deforest the jungle, start fires and extract the timber.

In Roraima, the peoples in voluntary isolation that inhabit the Pirititi Indigenous Land with Land-Use Restriction only have the temporary protection of a 2012 ordinance. This legal-administrative instrument restricting the use of third parties has been extended several times. The last one was on February 22, 2022 and, after three months, there has been no news of FUNAI initiating the definitive identification and delimitation studies of the Indigenous Land. Meanwhile, the growth of illegal activities puts the Indigenous people at risk, through the spread of diseases and potential land conflicts.

In the state of Pará, the first ordinance restricting the use of the Ituna Itatá Indigenous Land, an area of 142,000 hectares, was issued on January 11, 2011. Despite opposition from the Federal Government, the last renewal occurred on January 28, 2022. FUNAI was forced to do so when the press reported that its officials had met with second-line government officials to open this territory to logging, farming and mining.

The strategy consisted of denying the presence of Indigenous people and denouncing their existence as an invention of anthropologists. At the same time, they harassed
officials and technicians who had found evidence of the presence of Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation. While FUNAI and the Federal Government try to revoke the Land-Use Restriction measure, deforestation and illegal occupation are advancing rapidly in the Ituna Itatá Indigenous Land.

Recent studies show that over the last few years, the managers of the National System of Rural Environmental Cadastre (SICAR) allowed illegal rural properties to be registered. This agency is under the responsibility of the Brazilian Forest Service, which, in turn, reports to the Ministry of Agriculture. About 97% of the Ituna Itatá Indigenous Land is affected by irregular registrations and small roads have been built (illegally) to facilitate penetration, wood removal and occupation. As if that were not enough, the concessionaire Equatorial Energia installed infrastructure and supplies electricity to the invaders.

**When the new FUNAI deepens vulnerability**

The strategy to make Indigenous people disappear is not only focused on the voluntarily isolated Indigenous population. On April 22, 2020, FUNAI published Normative Instruction N°9/2020 that determines new guidelines for the Declaration of Boundary Recognition in Relation to Private Properties. The ordinance establishes that, at the time of issuing declarations requested by non-Indigenous occupants, FUNAI must only recognize those lands that are approved by a presidential decree as Indigenous Lands. Worse still, the Land Management System (Sistema de Gestão Fundiária, SIGEF) of the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), responsible for the official registration of rural properties, must follow the concepts and rules indicated. The measure caused an avalanche of applications.

In the areas not approved by the Executive Branch, the ordinance leaves the isolated Indigenous peoples in total defenselessness, having to face the agricultural and extractivist advance on their territories on their own. In practice, the body provides the applicant with a document that allows him/her to register the area as private property, require a license to clear, extract minerals, sell it or use it as an asset in the financial land market.
Last December 29, FUNAI informed its regional headquarters, Environmental and Territorial Management Services, and Local Technical Coordination that they should not include the execution of Territorial Protection activities in Indigenous Lands not yet approved by presidential decree in the 2022 budgets. With this instruction, FUNAI left the Indigenous peoples who find themselves in conflictive social and territorial contexts as a result of the advance of the agricultural frontier and illegal mining to their own fate.

Instead of protecting the Indigenous peoples, FUNAI deepens their vulnerability and the risk to their lives. Some very concrete cases are the Tupinambá Indigenous Land of Olivença (in Bahia), the Tekoha Dje’y/Rio Pequeno Indigenous Land (in Paraty, state of Rio de Janeiro) and 200 other territories. If the "new FUNAI", as the current leadership has been publicly presented, insists on maintaining this determination, 40 Indigenous Lands will be left unprotected in the state of Amazonas alone.

**The strategy of making them disappear**

There is a clear intention from Jair Bolsonaro’s government to expose the Indigenous population in voluntary isolation to contact with invaders and to convince society of the absence of isolated peoples. Literally, they seek to make them disappear. And FUNAI is an accomplice. It is a way to enable and legitimize the definitive opening of Indigenous Lands to usurpers, squatters, landowners and loggers.

With these actions, the Federal Government is taking another step in the path of relegating a significant portion of the Indigenous population and their traditional territories to their own fate – especially those who are in a situation of greater vulnerability, violence and risk. This is also happening in homologated Indigenous Lands, as is the case of the Yanomami Indigenous Land (TIY), which is invaded by more than 20,000 *garimpeiros* (gold prospectors) and armed militiamen who have the explicit support of the Federal Government.

According to MapBiomas calculations, mining in the TIY grew by 3,350% from 2016 to 2020. This has been the worst period since the *Terra Indígena* was homologated in 1991, and the Indigenous population in the TIY are facing the clearing, destruction and contamination of water courses with mercury; affectation of people's health; alarming
rates of malaria; spread of Covid-19; food sovereignty crisis; increase in cases of malnutrition; violent deaths and sexual abuse.

In the last three years and five months, the government of Jair Bolsonaro did not demarcate or homologate a single Indigenous Land. He thus fulfilled his commitment made during the 2018 election campaign and reaffirmed before taking office: not to demarcate a single centimeter of land for Indigenous peoples.

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