



Imminent Threats of Land Invasions and Violence Against Indigenous Peoples in the Brazilian Amazon

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Introduction: Under the Bolsonaro administration, indigenous territories across the Brazilian Amazon and the indigenous peoples actively defending them are under increasing threat. This was most recently illustrated by the murder of Emyra Wajãpi, in the northern state of Amapá, as reported in the New York Times article, “Miners Kill Indigenous Leader in Brazil During Invasion of Protected Land” (Saturday, July 27th, 2019). The article states, “The killing comes as miners and loggers are making increasingly bold and defiant incursions into protected areas, including indigenous territories, with the explicit encouragement of Brazil’s far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro.”

A second New York Times article published on July 28th, titled, “Under Brazil’s Far Right Leader, Amazon Protections Slashed and Forests Fall”, outlines the dramatic increase in deforestation as a result of Bolsonaro’s push to open up the Amazon to industrial activities. “Brazil’s part of the Amazon has lost more than 1,330 square miles of forest cover since Mr. Bolsonaro took office in January, a 39 percent increase over the same period last year, according to the government agency that tracks deforestation,” the article details. “The deforestation of the Amazon is spiking as Mr. Bolsonaro’s government pulls back on enforcement measures like fines, warnings and the seizure or destruction of illegal equipment in protected areas.”

Whereas the situation facing the Wajãpi requires urgent attention, so do many others across the Brazilian Amazon. Multiple indigenous peoples are desperately sounding the alarm, and might well be victims of “foretold massacres” if the Brazilian authorities don’t take decisive preventative action in each case. The following examples illustrates the relationship between land invasions, illegal logging and mining, deforestation and violent threats to indigenous land defenders.

(1) Ka’apor Indigenous People – Maranhão State, eastern Amazon

The Ka’apor of the Alto Turiaçu Indigenous Territory are staunch defenders of their territory comprising 530,524 hectares (~1,310,953 acres) of rainforest. Since 2013, they have deployed the Ka’apor Forest Guard, which expels land invaders and occupies areas of their territory that have been targeted for illegal logging. Their efforts to combat land invaders, loggers, and miners has come at a great cost: Over the last ten years, five Ka’apor leaders have been assassinated, including the high-profile case of Eusebio Ka’apor in 2015.

The Ka'apor are extremely concerned that history will repeat itself. In June and July of this year, the Forest Guard confronted and expelled loggers, including family members of local politicians. Those loggers are now reportedly looking for the Ka'apor leadership and making threats. Additionally, several Ka'apor leaders made a July 10th court appearance to identify a suspect in past deforestation, an act which potentially puts them a greater risk. In 2018, the state of Maranhão designated five Ka'apor leaders as sufficiently threatened to fall under an official protection program, but to date has not designated sufficient financial or political resources to provide effective protection.

Additional Information: On the Amazon's lawless frontier, murder mystery divides the locals and loggers – The Guardian (January 20, 2018): https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/21/amazon-forests-maranhao-state-loggers-kaapor-tribe-murder?CMP=share_btn_tw

(2) Munduruku Indigenous Peoples – Para State, central Amazon

The Munduruku people, located in hundreds of communities along the Tapajós River and tributaries, have been organizing for years to protect their territory from the construction of a series of seven hydroelectric dams planned in and around their territories. They have been fighting for the legal recognition of a sacred territory known as Sawré Muybu, immediately up river from the regional town of Itaituba.

On a July 2019 field mission, Amazon Watch staff saw evidence of illegal logging, fluvial and terrestrial gold and diamond mining within Munduruku territory, including roads, mines, and heavy equipment like excavators and mining barges. Extensive wildcat mining in the region has heavily polluted the Tapajós and its tributaries with silt and mercury. Land grabbers are also active in the region, as evidenced by a large cattle ranch operating illegally near Sawré Muybu village. As part of their initiative to self-demarcate their ancestral territories, the Munduruku are currently working to expel illegal loggers and shut down a large logging road that runs from the Jamanxim River (a tributary to the Tapajós) into their forests.

(3) Yanomami Territories Invaded by Illegal Miners – Roraima and Amazonas States, northern Amazon

From Mongabay article: “An estimated 20,000 illegal goldminers (garimpeiros) have entered Yanomami Park, one of Brazil's biggest indigenous reserves, located in Roraima and Amazonas states, near the border with Venezuela. The miners are well funded, likely by entrepreneurs, who pay workers and provide them with earthmoving equipment, supplies and airplanes. Three illegal air strips and three open-pit goldmines are in operation within the Yanomami indigenous territory. Indigenous leaders blame President Bolsonaro, with his incendiary anti-indigenous language, and his administration, with its policies that have defunded and gutted agencies responsible for law enforcement in the Amazon. Bolsonaro claims indigenous people want mining and industrial agribusiness on their lands, but the Yanomami vehemently deny such desires.”

Additional Information: Yanomami Amazon reserve invaded by 20,000 miners; Bolsonaro fails to act – Mongabay (2019): <https://news.mongabay.com/2019/07/yanomami-amazon-reserve-invaded-by-20000-miners-bolsonaro-fails-to-act/>

(4) Three cases documented by Amnesty International – Rondônia & Pará States, central and southern Amazon

From Amnesty International press release: “There is an imminent risk of violent clashes in Brazil’s Amazon region unless the government protects Indigenous peoples’ traditional lands from increasing illegal land seizures and logging by armed intruders, Amnesty International warned today (7 May 2019). Amnesty International recently visited three different Indigenous territories in northern Brazil where illegal intruders had begun or expanded efforts to seize land and/or cut down trees. Indigenous leaders told the organization that they had received death threats for defending their traditional lands. They also fear new intrusions in the dry season (May/June to October/November) when easier physical access to forests facilitates clearance and burning.

“Brazil’s Indigenous peoples and their land face enormous threats and the situation will soon become untenable in the dry season,” said Richard Pearshouse, Senior Crisis & Environment Advisor for Amnesty International. “The government must protect Indigenous peoples who are defending their land, or blood will be shed.”

In April 2019, Amnesty International interviewed 23 Indigenous people in three territories in northern Brazil: Karipuna and Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau in Rondônia state, and Arara in Pará state. Amnesty International also interviewed 13 people knowledgeable about intrusions in Indigenous territories, including government officials, Public Prosecutors and representatives of non-governmental organizations.

According to representatives of non-governmental organizations and authorities, intruders are often local individuals who are encouraged and supported to occupy plots of land and/or sell the timber by local farmers and politicians. Indigenous peoples in some territories conduct patrols to monitor and protect their land from these intrusions. As the intruders are often armed, there is a high risk of violent clashes with Indigenous peoples.

In all three sites, Indigenous leaders have repeatedly denounced recent illegal land seizures and logging to government authorities. However there have been only limited responses from government authorities, and illegal land seizures and logging have continued.”

Additional Information: Brazil: Risk of bloodshed in the Amazon unless government protects Indigenous peoples from illegal land seizures and logging – Amnesty International press release (2019): <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/05/brazil-risk-of-bloodshed-in-the-amazon-unless-government-protects-indigenous-peoples-from-illegal-land-seizures-and-logging/>

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