BRAZIL: HUMAN RIGHTS AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTIONS UNDER ASSAULT

As the government of Jair Bolsonaro takes power in Brazil, the nation’s indigenous peoples and environmental activists are sounding the alarm on the most severe assaults on social and environmental protections in 30 years. Below is a summary of pressing threats to the Brazilian Amazon and its peoples.

1. Institutional Attacks on Indigenous Land Rights

Brazilian indigenous leaders compare today’s institutional assault on native rights with the brutality of Brazil’s military dictatorship or even that of its Portuguese settlers. Among his first moves as president, Bolsonaro stripped the indigenous agency FUNAI of its mandate to identify and grant title to indigenous territories, transferring this authority to the Agriculture Ministry, which is led by anti-indigenous hardliners. The move definitively paralyzes land demarcations and incites new conflicts on indigenous territories. His government also attacked the legality of recent titling processes, announcing it would scrutinize indigenous demarcations from the past ten years, prompting fears of their annulment.

Meanwhile, the government shifted FUNAI’s oversight from the Ministry of Justice to the newly-formed Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights, headed by an evangelical zealot who has been denounced by indigenous peoples for misrepresentation and proselytising in native communities. The Bolsonaro government’s rollbacks of indigenous land rights are clearly tailored to serve Brazilian agribusiness and extractive sectors stridently working to permit industrial activities on protected native lands.

2. Invasions of Indigenous Territories

Mr. Bolsonaro’s brazen conflict of interest with the agribusiness sector sends dangerous signals to criminal factions such as land grabbers, illegal loggers, and wildcat miners, driving a wave of land invasions. His government’s retrograde agenda and the impunity it implies is emboldening criminals and driving an explosion of invasions of indigenous lands. As of late January, at least six cases of illegal invasions were documented across four Brazilian states. While such land invasions predate Bolsonaro’s tenure, recent attacks can be linked to the virulently anti-indigenous rhetoric emanating from Brasília, signaling a much more serious and widespread assault on natives lands and lives in times to come.
3. Rising Rural Violence

Brazil is the world’s deadliest country for those defending human rights and the environment, with agribusiness driving killings more than any other industry. Bolsonaro’s violent rhetoric has already led to a spike in rural violence, particularly against indigenous peoples and landless activists, emboldening militias controlled by powerful landowners to carry out attacks. His recent decree to loosen gun ownership in Brazil will deeply aggravate violence, particularly in rural areas. By endorsing violence by major landowners, Bolsonaro is fueling the intimidation of community leaders on the front lines of increasingly brutal land conflicts, including prominent indigenous leaders who now fear for their lives.

4. Dismantling of Environmental Institutions

Under Bolsonaro, Brazil’s Environmental Ministry (MMA) suffered devastating cuts, restructuring, and loss of autonomy. The ministry no longer has the jurisdiction to combat deforestation, which was among the principal roles of the country’s environmental policy since 1980. Management of Brazil’s forestry service was handed to the Agriculture Ministry, deeply undermining its mission to protect native forests. Meanwhile, the Environment Minister questioned the legitimacy of federal deforestation data and moved to inhibit the enforcement agency IBAMA from cracking down on environmental crime, signaling that fines for past crimes could be expunged. With Amazon deforestation at a ten-year high and mounting, the MMA’s mission has clearly become subordinated to the interests of agribusiness and other decidedly anti-environmental concerns.

5. Dispensing with Environmental Licensing

Members of Brazil’s notorious ruralista political bloc are aggressively advancing legislation that slashes environmental licensing norms. The proposed law would provide automatic approval for agribusiness projects and fast-track approval for major infrastructure development, while dispensing with the obligation to consult communities threatened by projects that primarily serve industrial activities in the Amazon. Subservient to the interests of the agribusiness and mining sectors, Bolsonaro’s government is determined to facilitate rollbacks that would essentially discard Brazil’s much-needed vetting process for projects that pose significant socio-environmental risks. The deadly mining waste disaster in Brumadinho underscores the need for improved, not reduced, environmental oversight.

Since taking power, the Bolsonaro government has unleashed an assault on human rights and environmental safeguards that is unprecedented since the fall of Brazil’s brutal military dictatorship. Meanwhile, a decree to curtail transparency of public records will limit access to the very information needed to assess the severity of impacts caused by today’s extreme policy shifts. As such, Bolsonaro’s socio-environmental rollbacks in the Amazon should be seen in the context of a generalized assault upon Brazil’s democratic principles and institutions.

The stakes couldn’t be higher for the future of the Amazon’s environmental integrity, and the safety of its indigenous and traditional communities. The threats cited here require a concerted response from grassroots to global levels in order to mount judicial, political, and economic barriers that impede Bolsonaro’s reckless agenda.

Amazon Watch works to protect the rainforest and advance the rights of indigenous peoples in the Amazon Basin.