

# The Attack on Indigenous Rights in Brazil

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*On 5 August, 2020, the Brazilian Supreme Court [ordered](#) **President Jair Bolsonaro** to institute measures aimed at protecting indigenous people from the Covid-19 pandemic. This ruling is the legal recognition of the totally disastrous anti-indigenous policies of the Bolsonaro government. Like other indigenous people living in the Peruvian jungles, eastern Bolivia, the Ecuadorian Amazon and the Colombian Amazon, Brazilian collectivities too have been disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. More than 23,000 members of 190 indigenous groups in the Amazon basin have been [infected](#) by the virus and all of these communities share a commonality – they suffer from structural inequalities.*

[According](#) to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), “Indigenous peoples, in particular indigenous women and girls are often disproportionately affected by epidemics and other crises. Indigenous peoples are nearly three times as likely to be living in extreme poverty as their non-indigenous counterparts. They account for almost 19 per cent of the extreme poor”. In Latin America, more specifically, it is [estimated](#) that 43% of the 44.7 million indigenous people are poor (living on less than \$5.50 a day in 2011 purchasing power parity prices (PPP)) and 24% are extremely poor (living on less than \$1.90 a day in 2011 PPP prices).

Another UN DESA document [states](#),

“Indigenous peoples in nearly all countries fall into the most “vulnerable” health category. They have significantly higher rates of communicable and non-communicable diseases than their non-indigenous counterparts, high mortality rates and lower life expectancies. Contributing factors that increase the potential for high mortality rates caused by COVID-19 in indigenous communities include mal- and undernutrition, poor access to sanitation, lack of clean water, and inadequate medical services. Additionally, indigenous peoples often experience widespread stigma and discrimination in healthcare settings such as stereotyping and a lack of quality in the care provided, thus compromising standards of care and discouraging them from accessing health care, if and when available.”

While Brazilian communities do experience the disadvantageous effects of structural inequalities, their plight has been politically amplified by the Bolsonaro administration which has accelerated extractivism during the Covid-19 pandemic. [With](#) more than 23,000 cases and 600 deaths, indigenous Brazilians are dying at a [higher rate](#) than the general population and it is estimated that they die of the virus [twice as often](#) as the non-indigenous people. Some communities, such as the Arara people, living near the Xingu river basin and the Xicrin in southwest Para state, are [on the verge](#) of extermination due to Coronavirus.

These high death rates among the indigenous population are [killing](#) knowledgeable elders,

the main transmitters of indigenous culture. The recent [death](#) of the famous leader, Aritana Yawalapiti of the Yawalapiti people, on August 5, 2020, underscores the cultural loss taking place as the diffusers of traditional knowledge die and the wisdom of indigenous people gets [lost](#).

Behind the soaring statistics on the death of indigenous people in Brazil, one can observe the unmistakable presence of Bolsonarian extractivism. The UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, **José Francisco Cali Tzay**, has [said](#),

“In some countries, consultations with indigenous peoples and also environmental impact assessments are being abruptly suspended in order to force through megaprojects relating to agribusiness, mining, dams and infrastructure.”

José Francisco Cali Tzay’s statement, while not explicitly referring to Brazil, accurately describes the consequences of Bolsonarian politics.

In the Brazilian region of [Rondônia](#), “Indigenous organizations have reported the presence of *garimpeiros* (illegal gold miners) and *madeireiros* (timber traffickers) who have used the current health crisis as a cover to intensify their profit-driven invasions in the territories where the Karipuna people lives.” Rondônia is a region where, ever since the election of Bolsonaro as the president, the National Mining Agency (ANM) has [granted](#) mining permits even for demarcated indigenous lands i.e. lands that have been legally regularized through the federal government and presidential authorization. In 2013, for example, “the Ariquemes Small-Scale Miners Cooperative (*Cooperativa Mineradora dos Garimpeiros de Ariquemes* or COOMINGA) obtained a small-scale gold mining permit for an area that includes part of the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau Indigenous Territory [which was officially demarcated in 2006]. The cooperative is now the third-largest producer of tin in the country, according to the ANM’s 2018 Annual Mining Report. In 2016, the Rondônia Tin Cooperative (*Cooperativa Estanífera de Rondônia*) acquired a mining permit to mine cassiterite, the main tin ore, in an area that included segments of the Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau territory. The largest open-air cassiterite mine in the world is located in Ariquemes, Rondônia.”

The events in Rondônia are directly driven by the extractivist agenda of Jair Bolsonaro which glorifies anti-indigenous hatred and allows extractive capital to exploit previously protected territories. Under his administration, applications to mine on indigenous lands in Amazon have [increased](#) by 91% and 4,000 requests have been [submitted](#) for mining on 31 indigenous reserves. Moreover, the number of invasions of indigenous areas has [increased](#) from 111 in 2018 to 160 in 2019 and in July 2019, 20,000 illegal gold miners had [invaded](#) the Yanomami Park, the largest indigenous reserve in Brazil. These illegal miners were “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.” As a natural result of the extension of extractivism into ecologically fragile areas, deforestation astronomically [increased](#) and “year-on-year deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon rose by 34% between August 2018 and July 2019, felling an area of forest about as big as Jamaica.” All the invasions have been punctuated by regular violence and [according](#) to the Human Rights Watch, “Indigenous people who have organized themselves to defend their forests—in the absence of adequate law enforcement—have been threatened, attacked, and, according to community leaders, murdered by people engaged in illegal deforestation.” In July 2019, for instance, 10-15

heavily armed men had [invaded](#) the village Yvytotõ of the Wajãpi community and [killed](#) one indigenous individual to access the gold reserves located in the village.

The ecocide, ethnocide and genocide of 2019 have continued in 2020 and in the first few weeks of the year, 5 indigenous people have been [murdered](#) due to land conflicts. Deforestation has persisted with 529 square kilometers of forest being [destroyed](#) in April, 2020, representing an [increase](#) of 171% when compared to the same month the previous year. Mining invasions, too, have progressed unabated and the Triunfo Do Xingo area, where many indigenous people live, has been [witnessing](#) the aggressive and repeated incursion of miners, cattle ranchers and other commercial actors. In June and July 2020, 3,842 fire alerts have been reported in Triunfo Do Xingo, linked to illegal land grabbing and mining activities, significantly increasing the Covid-19 risks of indigenous people whose co-infection of Covid-19 with other high-prevalence diseases can [lead](#) to high mortality rates.

Mining magnates in Brazil have been emboldened to murder indigenous people and invade ancestral lands by the Bolsonaro administration which has secured a suitable investment climate for extractivism. Through the fusion of anti-indigenist rhetoric and pro-mining policies, Bolsonaro has unleashed a war against the [900,000](#) indigenous people living in Brazil. In terms of rhetoric, the following [statements](#) are adequate to show how Bolsonaro has discursively activated the extermination and dispossession of indigenous people:-

(1) “The Indians do not speak our language, they do not have money, they do not have culture. They are native peoples. How did they manage to get 13% of the national territory”.

(2) “There is no indigenous territory where there aren’t minerals. Gold, tin and magnesium are in these lands, especially in the Amazon, the richest area in the world. I’m not getting into this nonsense of defending land for Indians”.

(3) “This unilateral policy of demarcating indigenous land by the Executive will cease to exist. Any reserve that I can reduce in size, I will do so. It will be a very big fight that we’re going to have with the UN”.

(4) “It’s a shame that the Brazilian cavalry hasn’t been as efficient as the Americans, who exterminated the Indians.”

In terms of policies, Bolsonaro has attempted to implement a “dream” initiative by [sending](#) a bill to the Brazilian Congress in February 2020. This bill would open Brazilian indigenous reserves to “commercial mining, oil and gas exploration, cattle ranching and agribusiness, new hydroelectric dam projects, and tourism — projects that have been legally blocked under the country’s 1988 Constitution.” Marcio Santilli, a former head of FUNAI (National Indian Foundation), the agency responsible for indigenous affairs, has [said](#) that the dream initiative will “not promote the economic development of the Indians, but guarantee the exploitation by third parties of their natural resources. It would encourage Indians to live from royalties while watching the dispossession of their lands.”

Bolsonaro’s staunch and brutal opposition to indigenous people has continued during the Covid-19 pandemic and in July 2020, the Bolsonaro government [vetoed](#) provisions of a law that entailed the government to provide disinfectants, drinking water and a guarantee of hospital beds to indigenous people amid the pandemic. [Bolsonaro](#) also “vetoed funding for the states and local governments with emergency plans for indigenous communities, as well

as provisions to help give them more information on coronavirus, including greater internet access.” Along with the orchestrated genocide of indigenous population, Bolsonaro is also busy protecting illegal mining from environmental actions. On 6 August, 2020, Bolsonaro’s Defence Ministry [suspended](#) operations by the environmental protection agency Ibama against illegal miners on an indigenous reserve in Amazon.

The Defence Ministry has [said](#) that the suspension occurred on the request of the Munduruku tribe who apparently want marauding miners to steal their lands. This claim is false insofar that the Munduruku tribe have [protested](#) against illegal gold mining operations in their territories in 2019 and have promised to keep on fighting against extractive elites. In fact, a [statement](#) released by the Munduruku tribe unequivocally expressed opposition to mining and made it clear that the indigenous group will never request miners to dispossess them: “You are destroying our sacred sites and disturbing our spirit world. This is bringing diseases and death to our people. We will not accept this destruction anymore...Gold mining is dividing our people, introducing new diseases, and contaminating our people with mercury. Mining brings drugs, alcohol, weapons, and prostitution. And greed.”

At the opening of the 74th United Nations general assembly, Jair Bolsonaro has [declared](#) that he is representing “a new Brazil, resurgent after being on the brink of socialism.” Now, we can observe how Brazil, revived by Bolsonaro after the supposed curse of socialism, is slaughtering indigenous people for the penetration of extractivism into the entrails of Amazon and other protected regions. Instead of installing sanitary cordons around indigenous territories and efficiently carrying out essential Covid-19 practices – isolation, laboratory confirmation, contact tracing, efficient detection of suspected cases – Bolsonaro has [called](#) Coronavirus a “little flu” and a “cold”, [denied](#) the infection and death rates and hysterically advanced the interests of the mining sector. Instead of these anti-science and extractivist policies, a science-based and socialist response would have been much better.

In addition to the proper protection of indigenous people living in remote regions, much could have been done to alleviate the conditions of the urban indigenous population which, in the case of Brazil, [constitutes](#) half of the indigenous population. This urban population serves as an expendable reserve army of labor for capitalism and consequently, experiences high levels of inequalities in the form of informal employment and gender pay gap. The [rate of informal employment](#) for indigenous women and men is 85% and 81%, respectively, compared to 52 per cent and 51 per cent for non-indigenous women and men. Furthermore, indigenous women’s hourly [earnings](#) are less than a third of those of non-indigenous men with the same level of education. During the pandemic, it is this indigenous reserve army of labor which is experiencing exploitation along with the indigenous people living in the protected regions.

The present-day mass deaths of Brazilian indigenous people are similar to the colonial ethnocide of late fifteenth and early sixteenth century that dramatically [reduced](#) the population from 150 million before 1492 to less than 11 million 100 years later. A native [commentary](#) on the colonial conquest of Guatemala and the consequent outbreak of smallpox plague terrifyingly encapsulates the contemporary indigenous situation: “Great was the stench of the dead. After our fathers and grandfathers succumbed, half of the people fled to the fields...The mortality was terrible. Your grandfathers died...we became orphans, oh, my sons! So we became when we were young. All of us were thus. We were born to die!”

As Brazil progresses into the Covid-19 pandemic, it is necessary that Bolsonaro’s

extermination campaign be stopped. Brazilian indigenous people [suffer](#) from malnutrition and other immune-suppressive conditions, thus increasing their susceptibility to Coronavirus infection. The [high](#) immunological vulnerability of indigenous communities has been compounded by Bolsonaro's crony capitalism that allies itself with extractive elites. While the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) has [urged](#) "Governments to intensify protection measures to stop external farmers, settlers, private firms, industries and miners from entering indigenous peoples' territories taking advantage of the present crisis", Bolsonaro has clashed head-on with these organizations, opening indigenous territories for extractive robbery. But indigenous resistance to Bolsonaro and his extractive power bloc is in the offing and the [statement](#) released by the Brazil's Indigenous People Articulation (APIB) sets the tone for the future revolt: "we remain firm, as our ancestors did, who for more than 520 years have resisted, fighting, whether for the right to territory, to overcome dictates of the dictatorship, as well as other epidemics, the landowners' bullets or the lengthy attempt to make our cultures and ways of life invisible."

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