

Brazilian Cerrado Savanna: Wildcat Miners Descend on Indigenous Reserve

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Global Research, April 19, 2021
[Mongabay](#) 16 April 2021

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)
Theme: [Environment](#), [Law and Justice](#)

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In a remote corner of Brazil’s Roraima state, a makeshift mining raft, made of empty gasoline barrels bound together with rope, floats in the Cotinga River. Under the surface of the murky water, its pump noisily scrapes up gravel and gold from the riverbed. On the horizon, chalk-colored pools of water polluted with heavy metals dot the savanna landscape of the Raposa Serra do Sol Indigenous territory.

Gold miners are technically barred from the vast territory, which is protected under federal law and reserved for the exclusive use of the 26,705 Indigenous people who call it home. Yet scenes like these — [captured](#) on video by Indigenous leaders last year — are becoming increasingly common in the Raposa Serra do Sol Indigenous Reserve as illegal wildcat miners, known as *garimpeiros*, descend on the territory in search of gold.

Illicit mining in the territory — which sprawls for 1.75 million hectares (4.32 million acres) along Brazil’s border with Venezuela and Guyana — has exploded over the last two years. Indigenous leaders in the territory now estimate there are between 2,000 and 5,000 *garimpeiros* in the area. The Indigenous Council of Roraima (CIR) [says](#) the number has doubled in the last year.



The Indigenous community has put up a barrier to stop outsiders — including illegal gold miners — from entering Raposa Serra do Sol Indigenous Territory and infecting those who live there with Covid-19. But residents say the garimpeiros are still pouring in. Image courtesy of the Indigenous Council of Roraima.

“The invasions are intensifying,” said Edinho Batista, CIR coordinator and part of the Macuxi ethnic group. “We have a huge challenge on our hands in Raposa Serra do Sol. And it’s thanks to the discourse of the government.”

Jair Bolsonaro has repeatedly supported miners and agribusiness over Indigenous groups — before and since becoming Brazil’s president — often using [incendiary language](#). In 2016, while still in Congress, [he declared](#): “We’re going to reverse Raposa Serra do Sol’s demarcation. We’re going to give rifles and weapons to all the ranchers!” As president, he has [said](#) of the reserve that “it is the richest area in the world. There are ways to exploit it rationally. And for the Indians, to give them royalties and integrate them into society.”

Possibly emboldened by such language, miners invading the territory have done far-reaching environmental and social damage. Swaths of the territory are burning, as garimpeiros set ablaze vegetation to clear the riverbanks, where most gold deposits can be found. In the last four months, satellites from U.S. space agency NASA have recorded 1,303 fire alerts in Raposa Serra do Sol, 80% of which lies in Brazil’s Cerrado savanna biome.

Environmentalists also warn that toxins like mercury — frequently used in mining to separate gold from grit — are seeping into the soil and flowing into water supplies. And with Covid-19 still ravaging Brazil, many fear illegal miners will infect Indigenous people, whose relative isolation makes them especially vulnerable to disease.

“The social and environmental impact is enormous,” said Alisson Marugal, federal public prosecutor for Roraima. “It’s devastating for the Indigenous community that lives there.”



An IBAMA agent investigates an illegal gold mine inside the Raposa Serra do Sol Indigenous Reserve during a past raid. Illicit invasions have increased in the territory since Jair Bolsonaro took office, but with IBAMA's sharply reduced budget and personnel, law enforcement has been lax. Image courtesy of IBAMA.

Emboldened to invade

In Raposa Serra do Sol, the battle against invaders can be traced back more than half a century. The push to demarcate the territory began in the 1970s, but was stymied by local politicians and powerful agricultural interests, who argued that preservation would deal an economic blow to Roraima.

While Raposa Serra do Sol was formally demarcated in 2005, its protected status has been disputed for years. Rice producers, soy farmers and cattle ranchers illegally occupying the land refused to abandon it. Finally, Brazil's Supreme Court recognized the demarcation in 2009 and ordered the removal of non-Indigenous occupants.

"We're talking about Indigenous land that is iconic," said Martha Fellows, a researcher at the Amazon Environmental Research Institute (IPAM). "There was a battle to demarcate it, which was very complex. And now it finds itself under attack again."

Observers blame the fresh incursions into the territory on Bolsonaro's rhetoric, a populist who took office in January 2019. Since taking office, he has greatly weakened environmental enforcement, opposed the demarcation of Indigenous lands and supported a bill that would allow wildcat miners to freely explore them. He has also repeatedly criticized Raposa Serra do Sol's protected status and vowed to review it.

"The Bolsonaro government is giving a green light with these plans to legalize economic activities inside Indigenous territories," said Carol Marçal, a campaigner at Greenpeace Brazil. "And clearly this has an automatic impact on the ground, in the form of more invasions of Indigenous lands."

The president’s rhetoric has been echoed by Roraima’s state government, which earlier this year passed a law [legalizing wildcat mining](#). While the law did not permit mining on Indigenous lands or environmentally protected areas, it allowed garimpeiros to explore public lands without prior environmental studies.

And even though the law was revoked by the Supreme Court after just two weeks, it left a profound mark on the state, according to Marugal.

“This law, above all, had a symbolic impact for the wildcat miners,” Marugal said in an interview with Mongabay. “They understood this to be a signal that their activities within Indigenous lands could also be legalized in the future.”



Indigenous community members in the Raposa Serra do Sol Reserve being vaccinated against Covid-19 in March 2021. The community worries that illegal gold miners, who are invading their territory, may be bringing Covid-19 with them. Image courtesy of the Indigenous Council of Roraima.

From conflict to Covid

The invasions into Raposa Serra do Sol have posed a series of fresh threats to the Macuxi, Wapichana, Taurepang, Sapará and Ingaricó Indigenous peoples who live within the territory. Batista says these communities are seeing their health impacted, which he blames on the toxins miners often use to extract gold — especially mercury.

“We are suffering from the environmental impact: the water contamination, the air pollution, the destruction of the soil,” Batista said.

Scientific studies have found mercury to be dangerous to human health and have linked exposure to skin diseases, infertility and birth defects. In Brazil, some [221 metric tons of mercury](#) seep into the environment each year as a result of illegal mining, preliminary studies showed in 2018.

In Roraima, a 2016 [government-backed study](#) discovered alarming levels of mercury in hair samples collected in Indigenous villages. One community was found to have mercury levels that were more than double what is considered a serious health risk.

Indigenous groups say miners are also bringing with them a host of social problems, including alcohol abuse and prostitution. Violence is on the rise too: in 2019, authorities [registered](#) 26 murders of Indigenous people in Roraima, the second highest rate in Brazil.

The advance of illegal mining is also spurring internal conflicts within Indigenous communities, according to Batista. “It ends up pitting people within the community against each other,” he said, noting that some reject the mines while others welcome the economic prospects they promise to Indigenous residents. “It’s fragmenting our communities.”

Many also fear that, as Covid-19 continues to batter Brazil, illegal miners may be bringing the virus into the territory and infecting Indigenous people, who have a history of being decimated by disease brought in from the outside. Batista says communities in Raposa Serra do Sol have put restrictions in place to keep Covid-19 out, but the surge in illegal miners is undermining their efforts.

“We created various sanitary barriers for containing the virus,” Batista said. “But the reality is that the garimpo continues operating, beyond these barriers.”

This week, Indigenous leaders in the neighboring Yanomami Indigenous Territory [accused](#) Ministry of Health workers of immunizing garimpos in exchange for gold, using vaccines meant for Indigenous people. Indigenous communities in Brazil have registered 46,509 known cases of Covid-19, with the eastern Roraima region accounting for [3,890 of these](#).



Members of the Indigenous community in Raposa Serra do Sol keep watch for outsiders invading their territory. Image courtesy of the Indigenous Council of Roraima.

Déjà vu

Authorities have struggled to contain the surge in invasions into Raposa Serra do Sol. Under Bolsonaro's leadership, environmental agencies like IBAMA and ICMBio have seen their [budgets and staff slashed repeatedly](#), leaving them with fewer enforcement resources.

Last year, three [high-ranking IBAMA officials were also fired](#), after their teams burned equipment confiscated during a mass crackdown on illegal miners in an Indigenous territory — a practice long used legally by IBAMA, but condemned by the president.

“There is a whole series of measures that were taken [by the Bolsonaro administration] with the intention of weakening the structures that are in place to protect Indigenous territories,” Fellows said. “And that makes it difficult to enforce the rules.”

Federal police forces carried out two operations in Raposa Serra do Sol in early 2020 with the aim of investigating the criminal structure behind the mining operations, according to Marugal. He said authorities are now planning another operation in hopes of expelling the outsiders, amid worries about the surge in invasions this year.

But broader enforcement efforts in the region may have also backfired. With a [renewed](#) crackdown on miners in the Yanomami Reserve located in the Amazon rainforest biome, Batista says that mining pressure seems to have shifted to Raposa Serra do Sol, most of which lies in the Cerrado savanna biome.

“The operations are expelling some of the miners from Yanomami,” he said. “And so they're just migrating here.” For many in Raposa Serra do Sol, this harks back to the 1990s, when the Yanomami reserve's demarcation set off a similar wave of expelled garimpeiros who poured into the territory.



Indigenous children in the Raposa Serra do Sol Indigenous Reserve. Indigenous land rights have been under assault in Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, leaving the future uncertain. Image © 1996 Fiona Watson / Survival.

Across Brazil today, illegal miners are opening up new areas for mineral exploration as existing ones become oversaturated or mineral deposits dwindle. About 90% of new mining sites in 2020 were in Indigenous territories or protected parks, data from Brazilian space agency INPE shows. It is known that this surge in wildcat mining is well supported by criminal networks and elites, who pump money into gold mining, paying the miners, providing heavy equipment and supplies, as well as planes and airstrips to fly out gold.

As a new frontier of illicit gold mining emerges in Raposa Serra do Sol, authorities worry the territory may be on the same path as the Yanomami reserve, where illegal mining has become so entrenched that garimpeiros have built whole towns to back their efforts. Indigenous groups say about 20,000 wildcat miners have invaded Yanomami so far — a figure the federal government disputes.

“Today, normal police actions are not enough in Yanomami,” Marugal said. “We need a huge police operation to expel the miners from there. It’s almost like fighting a war.

“And in Raposa Serra do Sol, the biggest concern right now is that the mining activity could spiral out of control in the same way that it has in Yanomami. This is our greatest fear.”

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