

4. Threats to the Indigenous population and their habitats in Amazonia

According to the Brazilian Constitution, the government is obliged to establish and protect Indigenous territories in which the Indigenous population traditionally lives. The demarcation of Indigenous territories (TI: formerly called “reservations”) was always controversially discussed in Brazil but was successfully promoted above all by the PPG7 programme, which supported the difficult work of FUNAI. This agency is responsible for the Indigenous population, identifying settlement areas, defining the boundaries of protected areas, and even legal registering. As already mentioned, the Indigenous territories amount to 22.3% of the 5.2 million km² of the area of the planning region *Amazônia Legal*.

President Bolsonaro stated that not a single inch of land will be demarcated for Indigenous peoples and that both the protected areas for natural ecosystems as well as Indigenous lands should be open to agriculture and mining. “The ‘agenda of death’ included the abolition of legal reserves and the opening of conservation units and Indigenous lands to mining, agriculture, and livestock” (Ferrante and Fearnside 2019, n. p.; Rorato *et al.* 2020).⁴⁵² Bolsonaro fulfilled his commitment made during the 2018 election campaign: not to demarcate or homologate land for Indigenous peoples. No demarcation process – of the 248 underway at FUNAI – had been completed.

The Bolsonaro government that saw the Indigenous population as an obstacle to economic growth – this was last heard during the military dictatorship in the 1970s – has allowed the use of these Indigenous lands by timber trade and mining companies (Vilani *et al.* 2022; Ferrante and Fearnside 2022). The responsibility of demarcation of Indigenous territories was transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture, in favour of agribusiness. The withdrawal of the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice for FUNAI was reversed by the Congress in May 2019, but the FUNAI president had been dismissed.

Boundary definitions of the protected areas are not only called into question, but the well-known argumentation of the “zoo effect of reservations” was cleverly advanced in order to discredit secure borders. Invasions of Indigenous territories, death threats and violence in the face of resistance from those affected were increasing considerably, especially in the “arc of deforestation” and in the state of Roraima.

The Indigenous peoples were afflicted by many threats and attacks which, in various intensities, make their daily lives a major struggle for survival: Deforestation, forest degradation, fires, gold mining, expansion of croplands, pastures, and the

452 Cf. chapter II.7.2, Table 17 in this volume: Approved Indigenous territories: Bolsonaro government (2019–2022): 0.

excessive advancing of infrastructural projects, particularly new roads. The threats related to forest loss were more intense in the buffer zones of the Indigenous territories than within, proving that these territories effectively promote environmental preservation.

There were no surveillance actions for combating illegal deforestation or removing invaders. During the pandemic, the government had cut the budgets of the environmental control agency to such an extent that the 250 employees were unable to monitor many thousands of mostly illegal mining sites. The environmental budget amounted to less than 1% of the state budget. Illegal mining has exploded in the Amazon region in recent decades. Between 1985 and 2020 the area mined in Brazil grew six times to a total of 206 000 ha, more than 70% of it in the Amazonian rain forests. *Garimpeiro* activities in gold mining (94% in Amazonia) surpassed the area associated with industrial mining in 2020.⁴⁵³

The Indigenous peoples rights were deliberately not guaranteed. In the future, only areas where Indigenous peoples already lived in 1988 can be declared Indigenous territories.⁴⁵⁴ Indigenous lands are key factors in conservation because they protect more than 22% of the Brazilian Amazônia Legal (Ferrante and Fearnside 2019). The transfer of the responsibility of demarcation from the Ministry of Justice to a new Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights, headed by another controversial minister, left a weak FUNAI.

In the twisted logic of the president and his advisers, all the activities to establish Indigenous territories have been attributed to the influence of international NGOs which, as the spearhead of foreign governments, are only out to harm the export success of Brazilian agribusiness for competitive reasons. Even at his speech at the United Nations, Bolsonaro stated that “some people, from inside and outside Brazil, supported by NGOs, insist on treating and maintaining our Indians as true cavemen” (Phillips 2021, n. p.).

There was a clear strategy of Bolsonaro’s government to convince society of the absence of isolated peoples and denouncing their existence as an invention of anthropologists. The dismantled FUNAI was an accomplice. This legitimised the final opening of traditional Indigenous territories to squatters, landowners and loggers (Verdum 2022).

All these problems also occurred with homologated territories, e.g., in the case of the Yanomami whose territory was already attacked in the late 1980s by gold seekers who settled in numerous places for prospecting and also created their own landing sites for small aircraft.⁴⁵⁵ During the Bolsonaro government, *garimpeiros* had free access to these territories where more than 20 000 gold prospectors with armed militia worked with the support of the federal and the state governments. Many gold miners work as loggers when the price of gold drops but will shift to gold mining when prices rise. Illegal clearing of forests, contamination of water courses with mercury, toxic to fish and affecting the health of Indigenous peoples severely, and increase of malnutrition were registered by NGOs. The mercury used to leach the gold causes water pollution, accumulates in the food chain and causes serious neurological damage.

453 <https://mapbiomas.org/> (accessed February 28, 2023).

454 Cf. chapters I.6.1 and IV.2.

455 Cf. chapter I.3.2.2 and Fig. 10 in this volume.

In some Yanomami villages, 92% of the inhabitants are contaminated with mercury (Prinz 2021; Wenzel 2021).

The *garimpeiros* moved there violently without any concern for the Indigenous inhabitants, who were not only threatened, but also chased away and, in a direct confrontation, killed. Diseases from outside and sexual abuse of Indigenous women were other main problems. The Covid-19 pandemic facilitated invasions into Indigenous territories; illegal miners penetrated unhindered during the lockdown. “They dragged the virus to the furthest corners of the forest. At the same time used their gold to buy the vaccinations intended for the Indigenous people” (Prinz 2021, n. p.). The infection and mortality rate among the Indigenous population was far higher than in the rest of Brazil. The Covid-19 pandemic is a devastating zoonosis that shows that biodiversity must be preserved at all costs (Nobre 2020). “[T]he pandemic and the militarisation of Brazil’s environmental protection have served as smokescreens to weaken environmental protections and have also put Brazil’s Indigenous people at risk and violated their rights” (Ferrante and Fearnside 2020, 258). The vulnerability of Indigenous groups has increased sharply because of failing provisions against Covid-19, such as vaccination.

Garimpeiros leave behind a crater landscape, in recent years they acquired suction dredgers and other heavy machinery, speedboats, small aircraft, and recently automatic weapons.

Meanwhile, with the appearance of the drug mafia,⁴⁵⁶ gold exploitation has reached a new dimension. Lack of inspections, impunity and links with politics were attracting organised crime.⁴⁵⁷ The PCC (First Command of the Capital) is a dreaded drug mafia from São Paulo, now apparently operating in the area of the Alto Parima in Roraima and tyrannising the Yanomami villages. They threaten not only the Indigenous population, but also the *garimpeiros*: For about three years, the PCC has now dominated gold production in Roraima. They even control access to the rivers and charge fees. Since “the government doesn’t regulate the purchase of gold, the *garimpeiros* have no one to sell it to and end up being lured by these criminals and traffickers” (Prinz 2021, n. p.).

The fact that organised crime is now also involved in gold mining makes the problems all the bigger (Reuters, 18.08.2022). Gold is attractive to the mafia mainly because it allows to launder money from drug or arms deals. The gold illegally mined on Yanomami territory reaches the global gold market without major problems. It is sold in the neighbouring countries of Venezuela, Suriname and French Guiana or in the small shops of the Rua do Oro, the “Gold Street”, in Boa Vista, the capital of Roraima, without authorisation from the Central Bank (Prinz 2021). In 2020, almost 30% of the 174 tons of gold production in Brazil was sold irregularly. This amounts to US\$ 1.8 billion of potentially illegal gold, more than three times the Ministry of Environment’s 2020 budget (Wenzel 2021).

There is alarming concern about increasing violence and links between drug traffickers and environmental crimes such as illegal logging, fishing and mining in the rain forest. Obviously, ties are existing between the major cocaine trafficking organisation

456 On drug trafficking in Amazonia see also: Machado (2002; 2007; 2009); Schöenberg (2002a; 2002b; 2010); among others.

457 Informations based on the network Amazônia Real. The independent and investigative journalism agency Amazônia Real is part of a global network of more than 200 news outlets.

PCC and wildcat gold miners. Less stringent controls make criminal environmental activities attractive for drug gangs as a means of laundering drug money. Cross-border criminal groups in the Javari region are buying up local river fish to launder drug funds. Visitors travelling in this region are at high risk, some have been killed. The homicide rate in the Brazilian Amazon region rose by 62 % in 2021, whereas the overall rate for Brazil fell by 9 % (Fabio 2022).

Since the mid-1990s, transport routes of drug trafficking have increasingly spread from the cocaine production areas in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia to the southern route via Paraguay or via the Brazilian Amazon region. According to Europol, 45 tons of cocaine from Brazil worth more than € 1 billion were seized in Europe in 2020.⁴⁵⁸ In recent times, drug smugglers have switched to transport by small aircraft, using numerous hidden landing sites in the rain forest on the way to Europe via Guyana and Suriname, without being detected by radar. However, the small unpaved runways are visible in aerial photographs and satellite imagery. Sometimes, however, this was “overlooked” by the control bodies.

In addition to the Yanomami in Roraima, the Mundurukú and Kayapó in Pará, the Karipuna and Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau in Rondônia and the Guajajara in Maranhão are affected by the new gold rush. The Munduruku Indigenous territory has been under intense attack, when heavily armed *garimpeiros* with air support from helicopters invaded the territory, attacked the houses of Indigenous leaders and a federal security force base that had been established there to fight the criminals (Wenzel 2021). Some of the Munduruku people have been recruited as paid workers by the *garimpeiros*.

Hundreds of illegal mining dredges are concentrated on the Rio Madeira, creating a floating city. The miners count on the support of businessmen and politicians who have been promoting this illegal activity for many years and illegal miners feel empowered to carry on with little concern. At times, the Federal Police and IBAMA destroyed some rafts located in the Rio Madeira, but many miners escaped with their equipment.

In general, in Amazônia Legal, the official control and security measures on site have been greatly reduced through job cuts. Indigenous leaders took a stand against the invasions of Indigenous territories and called the government’s projects as “genocide, ethnocide, and ecocide” and an “open declaration of war against the native population.”⁴⁵⁹

The repeatedly cited comparison of the population density between Indigenous territories – 520 000 people living there in 2012⁴⁶⁰ – and regions of the rest of Brazil is nonsensical. The demand for land of groups operating in shifting cultivation which, however, only create small areas of deforestation for self-sufficiency and after a few years migrate on to an ecologically more favourable location, is much higher than in other regions of the country. The protection of rain forests by Indigenous peoples is of paramount importance.

The Amazon Synod, which met in Rome in October 2019 under the leadership of Pope Francis, dealt not only with central ecclesiastical topics but also with “holistic ecology.” The environmental problems in the Amazon region, their social consequences as well as the protection of the habitat of Indigenous peoples were discussed in partic-

458 David Klaubert, FAZ, March 11, 2023.

459 Documents of ISA (Instituto SocioAmbiental) and *The Guardian*; Kohlhepp (2021b).

460 Information of ISA in 2019.

ular. In view of the conflict-laden situation in Amazonia, which also threatens church representatives – the case of Bishop Kraeutler of the diocese of Xingu,⁴⁶¹ threatened with death, went through the world press – the Indigenous population hoped for support and pragmatic help from the Catholic Church.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) agree unequivocally that the climate crisis and the loss of biodiversity are problems of the highest order. According to the IPBES, the sustainable use of wild plants and animals and the preservation of stable ecosystems are the most important factors to stop species extinction and the loss of natural habitats (IPBES 2019).

Indigenous peoples are the guardians of ecosystems that store large amounts of carbon. At the UN Climate Summit in Glasgow 2021 (COP 26), the Indigenous were the focus of a UN environment conference for the first time. Tropical rain forests protected by Indigenous groups are very strong carbon sinks, crucial for climate protection, with 80 % of the remaining biodiversity worldwide. In Glasgow, public and private sectors pledged US\$ 19 billion to stop tropical deforestation to fight climate change and protect biodiversity. 141 countries, including Brazil, have signed a declaration to respect the land rights of Indigenous peoples. However, the wording “in accordance with national legislation” raised many doubts about the practical implementation of these proposals (Seligmann 2021).

461 Cf. chapter II.6.1.

