
[Brazil: Isolated indigenous peoples continue to face threats](#)

Photo: Gleyson Miranda, 2010 – FUNAI files, source: Pueblos Indígenas en aislamiento voluntario y contacto inicial, IWGIA – IPES – 2012

The Amazon region, coveted and impacted by infrastructure megaprojects undertaken as part of the Brazilian government's Growth Acceleration Programme (PAC) and the South American Regional Infrastructure Integration Initiative (IIRSA), which are aimed at promoting the exploitation and exportation of natural resources for the benefit of big transnational companies, is no longer a quiet and safe habitat for the peoples who have lived in the Amazon for thousands of years. There are an ever growing number of conflicts: on one side are the indigenous peoples and other traditional communities who resist the occupation of their territories in every possible way; on the other, the big construction companies, energy companies, banks, logging companies, mining companies, oil companies, ranchers and the government with its authoritarian "development" projects. In the midst of this economic model based on large-scale agribusiness, extractive industries and the export of raw materials, isolated indigenous peoples are struggling to maintain their freedom and independence by taking refuge in remote, inaccessible areas, which have become practically non-existent. The threat of the extinction of these groups of people is an increasingly real possibility. In this article we will explore some of the most dramatic situations.

1. Threats to the isolated Awá Guajá people in Maranhão

The threats to the survival of the Awá Guajá began in the 1950s with the construction of the BR 222 highway, and were exacerbated by the Great Carajás Project (financed with World Bank and European Union funds) initiated in 1982. A railway line was constructed through the territory of these people to transport minerals from the Sierra de Carajás to the port of São Luis, accompanied by a highway.

With the opening up of the Awá's lands by the Great Carajás Project, due to a lack of state control, thousands of people moved into their territory, from loggers to ranchers to small farmers. The result of this invasion was the annihilation of the Awá. "Those who were not killed by weapons very often succumbed to the diseases introduced, against which the Awá had no immune defences."

The demarcation of the Awá, Caru, Araribóia and Alto Turiaçu indigenous lands, which in addition to the Awá Guajá are also home to the Guajajara, Ka'apor and Tembé peoples, was supposed to provide some measure of protection for the areas in which the surviving isolated groups of Awá Guajá move about. This was not the case. The invaders stayed where they were, new illegal roads were built, the Carajás railway line is being doubled, and deforestation has continued, reaching 31% of the Awá Indigenous Territory, according to 2010 figures.

A petition submitted to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights by Survival International and the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), a Brazilian NGO, reveals that "in August 2012, loggers began to converge in the direction of the village of Juriti from three different directions. In

September, a team from FUNAI (the National Indian Foundation, a government agency) and other government functionaries were forced to withdraw from the territory by armed loggers.” Logging activity continues to advance with impunity within the demarcated indigenous territories and trucks freely leave the area loaded with timber. The isolated Awá are therefore completely at the mercy of the loggers, exposed to all manner of violence, and even genocide. The state’s failure to act is condemning the Awá Guajá to extinction.

2. Threats to the isolated indigenous people of the Upper Envira River, Acre

These are indigenous people living on the border between Brazil and Peru. On the Brazilian side they share their territory with the Ashaninka people. They are suffering the pressure of Peruvian logging companies, drug trafficking and oil industry projects moving into their lands. Their presence is frequently noted near Ashaninka and Kulina villages. FUNAI operated the Upper Envira River Ethno-Environmental Protection Front in the region, but abandoned it in the first half of 2012. A team from the Western Amazon branch of CIMI conducted a study tour of the region in early 2013 and described the situation as follows:

“The first impression is one of desolation, upon seeing the base that was abandoned barely a year ago, with weeds covering part of the houses and outbuildings. The main house was completely open and everything was overturned, a sign of the presence of people, although there is no way to confirm that the isolated peoples had been there.

“There are many abandoned communication devices in the area. At the entrance to the main house there are two apparently new batteries, possibly used for radio communications. We saw equipment that appeared to be for radio communications, a stabilizer and many cut wires. Outside the house is the parabolic dish antenna that appears to be intact despite the abandonment of the area.

“In the other buildings at the base, mainly in what appears to have been a storage shed, we observed the waste of costly materials such as a boat motor, and outboard motor and a generator, all totally abandoned. Among the other materials scattered around on the floor, what particularly caught our attention were the hundreds of CBC brand 20-calibre cartridges. The reason for so many cartridges to be gathered in a single place is still not fully clear to us.

“We are concerned by the current state of abandonment of the base and the lack of protection of the isolated peoples, because we do not know what cultural or physical harm they could suffer if they were to come and break the batteries or take other toxic products back to their homes, for example.

“What we have been told is that the last team working there left in a great hurry, practically forced out by the Peruvians...”

In addition to the serious potential consequences of the toxic and explosive materials abandoned in the territory inhabited by the isolated peoples, the state has succumbed before the threat of the invaders and reneged on its obligation to protect these peoples.

Another form of violence against these isolated populations is the lack of adequate and regular health care in the Ashaninka and Kulina villages from the Special Secretariat on Indigenous Health (SESAI). This could lead to the silent decimation of entire communities, since isolated peoples frequently show up in indigenous homes and take objects away with them, and these could include clothing or nets contaminated with flu viruses or other diseases.

3. Threats to the isolated indigenous people of the Javari Valley

Oil companies are posing a serious threat to the isolated indigenous peoples on both the Peruvian and Brazilian sides of the border through their activities around the Javari Valley Indigenous Territory.

On the Peruvian side, the Canadian company Pacific Rubiales Energy is conducting seismic testing in the area of Lot 135, in a region where the presence of isolated indigenous peoples has been observed. Lot 135 overlaps the Tapiche-Blanco-Yaquerana indigenous territorial reserve. The company plans to clear a total of 789 kilometres of seismic lines as well as opening up 134 clearings for helicopters to land. On the Brazilian side, the National Petroleum Agency (ANP) commissioned airborne geophysical and geochemical surveys in the Acre River basin in 2007, followed in 2009 by seismic prospecting along 12 lines totalling 1,017 kilometres in the Upper Juruá River region, a mere 10 kilometres from the southern border of the Javari Valley Indigenous Territory, although one of these lines crosses a dock used by the Marubo indigenous people.

There are at least 15 isolated indigenous groups in the Javari Valley who move throughout a vast area of land. These peoples were already tormented by oil prospecting in the 1970s, which even led to conflicts resulting in deaths, raising great concern over the threat posed by oil industry activity. Even more troubling is the fact that neither the indigenous peoples nor FUNAI were informed, and much less consulted, about this new prospecting activity.

Another threat to the isolated indigenous peoples of the Javari Valley are the diseases attacking the indigenous population due to the lack of adequate medical care from the authorities. This led to the “Indigenous Peoples of the Javari Valley United for Health and Life” campaign, which ended in late 2012. There is an increasingly frequent presence of isolated indigenous peoples in the vicinity of the villages of other indigenous peoples who live in the Javari Valley, which raises great concern over the possibility of infection with contagious diseases that could be fatal for these isolated groups.

4. Threats to the isolated peoples in the area of impact of the Madeira Hydroelectric Complex and the Bom Futuro Reserve, Rondônia

According to the information available, there are five groups of isolated indigenous peoples in the area of the Madeira Hydroelectric Complex. They are seriously threatened by the invasion of the Bom Futuro Reserve by loggers and by the Madeira Complex itself, which involves the construction of the Santo Antônio and Jirau hydroelectric dams, located in the municipality of Porto Velho, Candeias do Jamari and the district of Jacy-Paraná, in the state of Rondônia.

Hemmed in on all sides, these people move about near the village of Kyowã, which is a village of the Karitiana indigenous people, 90 kilometres from Porto Velho. According to reports from the Karititana, a number of people from Kyowã were gathering cashews less than five kilometres away from the village when they encountered a group of isolated indigenous people, made up of several men and women, all of them carrying bows and arrows. This group has been sighted by the Karitiana on numerous occasions, as have the traces left behind in the places where they have camped. This has provoked a sense of insecurity among the Karitiana, who can no longer freely move through their territory. On a number of occasions when they have noted the presence of isolated indigenous peoples they have tried to talk with them, to see if they speak the same language.

The sightings of isolated indigenous groups near the village led the Karitiana to notify the local Ethno-Environmental Front. According to some village leaders, nothing was done.

In October/November of 2012, employees working on the construction of the Jirau hydroelectric dam who were transporting fuel to the construction site in the district of Jacy-Paraná reportedly sighted two nude indigenous men carrying bows and arrows.

Another situation reported was that of a group of isolated indigenous peoples seen by a young man herding cattle very close to the city of Porto Velho, on the outskirts of the localities of Ulisses Guimarães and Jardim Santana.

The threats to the life of these peoples posed by these large-scale projects are obvious, given the serious conflicts that could be provoked among them, in addition to exposing them to genocide.

5. Isolated indigenous peoples threatened by the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam

On July 29, 2011, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) granted precautionary measures for the members of the indigenous communities of the Xingu River Basin, calling on the Brazilian state to adopt, among others, “measures to protect the lives, health, and physical integrity of the members of the Xingu Basin indigenous communities in voluntary isolation and to protect the cultural integrity of those communities, including effective actions to implement and execute the legal/formal measures that already exist, as well as to design and implement specific measures to mitigate the effects the construction of the Belo Monte dam will have on the territory and life of these communities in isolation.”

Three years later, it can be seen that practically no actions have been undertaken by the government to comply with the IACHR’s request. The report “PM-382-10/P-817-11 Traditional communities of the Xingu River Basin, Pará, Brazil” released on April 19, 2013 states that “there is no knowledge or clear idea of the existence of effective actions for the implementation and execution of legal/formal measures or of the implementation of specific measures to mitigate the effects of the construction of the Belo Monte dam on the territory and life of these communities in isolation. Even after the granting of precautionary measures by the IACHR, the state has not implemented sufficient and effective actions to protect, in particular, the communities in isolation; the measures that have been implemented are temporary and weak and have not provided efficient protection as requested by the IACHR.”

Moreover, there are isolated indigenous groups in the Xingu River Basin that were not mentioned by FUNAI and therefore means of protection for them were not even considered.

6. Hydroelectric dam projects that threaten the isolated indigenous peoples of the Tapajós River Basin

There are consistent reports of the existence of at least five groups of isolated indigenous peoples in the Tapajós River Basin, a region where a series of hydroelectric dams are planned. This means that there are five more isolated groups in danger of extinction if the dams are constructed. It is troubling that the government, which is responsible for protecting the lives of these peoples, is planning projects of this scale in their territories, when it is well known that there is no way to control their effects nor means to assess their reach.

The state’s approach to development endangers the future of isolated indigenous peoples

The cases overviewed above provide a clear picture of the little or no attention paid to the protection of isolated indigenous peoples. In the case of the Awá Guajá people in Maranhão and the isolated

indigenous people of the Envira River in Acre, the state has succumbed to illegal logging and drug trafficking, leaving the isolated peoples fully exposed to the threats posed by these criminal activities.

Added to this are the precarious health services provided to indigenous peoples who enter into contact with the isolated groups, a situation reported in the Javari Valley and as well as the Envira River, which also places the lives of these groups in grave danger. What characterizes the role played by the state in these cases is inaction. In the case of the hydroelectric dams of the Madeira River, Belo Monte and the Tapajós River Basin (if they were to be constructed), the threat to the lives of isolated indigenous peoples would result from state action: it is the state that is planning, promoting and financing the construction of these dams, without considering the existence of isolated indigenous peoples, and then failing to adopt the necessary measures to effectively protect them.

It is extremely troubling that the government, which is aware of the violence towards isolated indigenous peoples resulting from large-scale projects in the Amazon in the recent past (such as the death of 2,000 Waimiri Atroari indigenous people caused by the construction of the BR 174 highway), would continue to serve the interests of the plunderers of the Amazon by recreating situations that endanger the lives and futures of these people.

It is clear that the state's current approach to "development" includes no space for indigenous peoples, and much less for isolated indigenous peoples. Nor is there space for traditional communities, cultural diversity or nature. It remains to be seen if this vision for the future, based on violence and predation, is the kind of vision that Brazilian society wants for itself.

Article drafted by the CIMI Support Team for Isolated Indigenous Peoples in May 2013.