‘Bolsonaro wants to destroy the lot of us’
Indigenous tribes of the Amazon prepare resistance to invaders

A blood-orange sun set over the forest canopy, Raimundo Kanamari pondered his tribe’s future under Brazil’s far-right president. “Bolsonaro’s no good,” he said. “He wants to destroy the lot of us, bomb our villages.”

An aerial assault on the Amazon seems far-fetched. But campaigners believe Jair Bolsonaro’s government is the biggest threat to indigenous communities since military rulers bulldozed highways through the region nearly five decades ago, leaving behind a trail of death.

Not since the dictatorship have we lived through such a tough moment,” said Jaime Siqueira, of the Indigenous Work Centre (CTI), an NGO helping to defend indigenous people. “It’s not just deforestation that has gone up in the Amazon. Violence against indigenous groups has too.”

Ewerton Marubo, a leader in the Javari Valley reserve – an area nearly the size of Portugal sheltering many of Brazil’s uncontacted tribes – said its 6,000 people faced a new era of ruin. “(Bolsonaro) is proving himself to be the number one enemy of the indigenous,” he said.

On a steamy evening, Marubo was one of two dozen local leaders in Atalaia do Norte – the riverside portal to Javari – to discuss how to defend the reserve.

Like other indigenous territories in the Amazon, Javari – created in 1998 to protect the tribes – has long suffered incursions from intruders seeking to cash in on its natural resources. But as Bolsonaro ratchets up his anti-indigenous rhetoric and dismantles Funai – the chronically underfunded agency charged with protecting Brazil’s 300-odd tribes – Javari leaders fear it will get worse.

“The current government’s dream is to exterminate the indigenous people so they can take our land,” claimed Kevin Mayornana, 39, a leader from Javari’s Matsés tribe.

Marcos Mayornana, also a Matsés leader, said that by allowing invaders into Javari, and depriving tribes of healthcare and education, Bolsonaro was trying to force them from lands that could then be exploited. “All he thinks about is money. All he thinks about is deforestation,” he said, warning of the implications for the climate. “The forest isn’t just for us. It’s for everyone.”

The Javari Valley is far from the current government’s dream. The agency, whose new Bolsonaroan boss has too little money to buy the land from outsiders and protect the reserve, is starved of cash that staff must buy their own anti-venom for perilous weeks-long missions into the jungle. Marubo said: “If we don’t know how to think, said Marubo, who hopes foreign funding might help tribes adopt surveillance techniques to safeguard their land. “If the government opens this up, in two years it’ll all be gone.”

Indigenous leaders fear Bolsonaro’s government will not be content with controlling the indigenous lands. “He wants to destroy our women, our children. He’s a child.” said Ewerton Marubo, tribal leader, referring to the president’s wife and former model.

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But Javari activists and elders are determined to resist him. “He sees us as animals. As if we didn’t know the wonders of modernity.”

Marcos Mayornana

Ewerton Marubo

Tribal elder, Javari Valley

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Atalaia do Norte, the riverside portal to the Javari Valley reserve

PHOTOGRAPH: ANA PALACIOS

A Kikuroro boy, Xikxuuy voXukve, with a sloth that he has hunted in the Javari. There are thought to be 16 ‘lost tribes’ in the reserve.

PHOTOGRAPH: GARY CALTON/OBSERVER

‘We must find a way of protecting ourselves,’ says Lucia Kanamari, one of the Javari Valley’s few female indigenous leaders.

PHOTOGRAPH: TOM PHILLIPS/THE GUARDIAN

If the government opens this up, in two years it’ll all be gone

Forest burns near a reserve in Rondônia, in Brazil’s far-west, where environmentalists say Bolsonaro is poised to destroy.

PHOTOGRAPH: DADO GALDIERI/BLOOMBERG