

World
Brazil

'Bolsonaro wants to destroy the lot of us'

Indigenous tribes of the Amazon prepare resistance to invaders



▲ '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

Tom Phillips
Atalaia do Norte

As 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 Mayoruna, 39, a leader from Javari's Matsés tribe.

Marcos Mayoruna, 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 only indigenous territory threatened under Bolsonaro, who compared the inhabitants to animals in zoos and vowed not to demarcate "one square centimetre" of land for such groups.

Thousands of wildcat miners - emboldened by Bolsonaro's view that reserves are too big - have reportedly been pouring on to Yanomami lands near Brazil's border with Venezuela in search of gold. South, in Rondônia state, the Uru-eu-wau-wau tribe are battling to keep armed land-grabbers off their 1.9m-hectare (7,000 sq miles) reserve. But the stakes are particularly high in Javari, a sweep of rainforests and rivers thought to house 16 "lost tribes" living in



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

Ewerton Marubo
Tribal elder, Javari Valley

◀ A Korubo boy, Xikxuvo Vakwë, 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

▼ Forest burns near a reserve near Jundia, in Roraima state, as President Jair Bolsonaro opens up indigenous land to outsiders

PHOTOGRAPH: DADO GALDIERI/BLOOMBERG



◀ Atalaia do Norte, the riverside portal to the Javari Valley reserve PHOTOGRAPH: ANA PALACIOS

their own anti-venom for perilous weeks-long missions into the jungle.

Larraín said: "It's an area the size of a country, almost completely unprotected. I feel overwhelmed."

Bolsonaro has warned the international community against meddling in the Amazon, and paints himself as a champion of indigenous people who no longer want to live "like prehistoric men with no access to technology, science, information and the wonders of modernity".

But Javari activists and elders are determined to resist him. "He sees us as animals. As if we didn'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 area up, in two years it will all be gone. The wood will be gone. The fish will be gone. The rivers will all be polluted."

Lucia Kanamari, one of Javari's few female leaders, said: "If the government doesn't support us, we must find a way of protecting ourselves. He's not a president who has come to fix things. He's a president who has come to destroy."

The Guardian visited the Amazon with support from the aid agencies Red Eclesial PanAmazónica and Cidse



voluntary isolation. For such groups, who lack immunity to simple illnesses such as influenza, contact with outsiders can be fatal.

Cristina Larraín, an activist for the Indigenous Missionary Council (Cimi), said Javari was under assault from loggers, ranchers, hunters, fishermen, wildcat goldminers and oil firms from across the Peru border.

Funai has 18 staff to stop intruders entering the 8.5m-hectare enclave and four other reserves to the south. The agency, whose new Bolsonaro boss horrifies specialists, is so starved of cash that staff must buy