

At Rio's Carnival, Yanomami leaders fight genocide with samba



Rio de Janeiro, February 17 (RHC)-- Yellow and green feathers radiating from his headdress, Davi Kopenawa strode onto the parade route with a mission in mind. All around him, the city of Rio de Janeiro was pulsing with music and merry-making: It was February 12, and the world's largest Carnival

celebration was under way. But Kopenawa was not in town to party.

Rather, he had travelled more than 3,500 kilometres (2,000 miles) from his village in Brazil's Amazon rainforest to spread a dire message: His people, the Yanomami, were in trouble.

For decades, the Indigenous Yanomami have suffered at the hands of illegal gold miners, who destroyed vast stretches of their homeland and polluted their rivers with mercury.

But since 2019, the crisis has reached new heights, with hundreds of Yanomami dying from conditions related to the mining. President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has gone so far as to declare the situation a "genocide". "Every day, we face death in our villages and attacks from illegal miners," Kopenawa, a shaman, told Al Jazeera.

So this year, Kopenawa and other Indigenous leaders took an unusual step. They teamed up with Salgueiro, one of Rio's celebrated samba schools, to stage an awareness campaign, right in the middle of the annual Carnival festivities.

The result was unveiled in the early hours of Monday at Sambadrome, one of the premier destinations for Carnival parades. Floats dedicated to the "people of the forest" sailed down the Sambadrome's wide parade avenue, surrounded by stands packed with thousands of spectators.

Some of the floats featured larger-than-life depictions of Indigenous peoples, arms outstretched as if to soar above the pavement. One float, however, represented the death and destruction wrought by the miners, with feathered headdresses crowning skulls.

The threat of death, Kopenawa warned, was no exaggeration. As miners raze and pollute the forest, he has seen firsthand his people suffer. "We depend on the forest for our survival. Now we have no drinkable water, no fish. Nothing to eat."

From January to November last year, 308 Yanomami people died in clashes with illegal miners or from conditions linked to the expansion of mining. Half of the deaths reported last year were children under the age of four.

Malnutrition is chief among the causes. With forests destroyed and rivers polluted, many Yanomami have lost their traditional food sources. Some go hungry. Others rely increasingly on food imports with little nutritional value.

Malaria has also spread, as illegal mining operations leave stagnant pools of water that serve as breeding grounds for disease-spreading mosquitoes. Diarrhoea has grown more common, as has poisoning from the mercury used to extract gold from riverbeds.

To treat the ill, the Brazilian government has conducted several airlifts over the past year to transport patients to nearby cities like Boa Vista. But once they have recovered, many Yanomami report they have had difficulty returning to their communities, some of which are located deep in the Amazon rainforest. A 2023 government report indicated it can take years to secure a flight home.

The Yanomami's territory, after all, is vast: Roughly the size of Portugal, it sits on approximately 9.6 million hectares (about 23.7 million acres) near Brazil's northern border with Venezuela.

Under Brazilian law, that land is designated for the "autonomous economic use" of the Yanomami. But with resources like timber, fish and gold available in its forests, illegal industry has encroached on Yanomami territory, often threatening its defenders with violence.

This year's Carnival celebration in Rio paid tribute to two victims of the bloodshed on Indigenous lands.

One group of parade participants unfurled a green banner with the faces of British journalist Dom Phillips and Indigenous expert Bruno Pereira, both murdered in another Indigenous territory after an encounter with illegal fishermen.

Some Indigenous advocates point to the presidency of far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro as the start of a period when threats skyrocketed. Inaugurated in 2019, Bolsonaro oversaw a stretch of increased deforestation in Brazil: Forest loss hit a 15-year high. He also rolled back environmental protections in favour of advancing business interests in areas like the Amazon.

“The whole situation is the fault of Bolsonaro who, from day one, said there was too much land in Brazil for too few Indians and who always defended the commercial exploitation of the rainforest,” said Dario Kopenawa, the shaman’s son and an Indigenous activist in his own right.

At one point, an estimated 20,000 miners entered Yanomami territory — a population nearly two-thirds the size of the Yanomami people, who number upwards of 30,000.

But Bolsonaro was voted out of office in 2022, and the left-leaning Lula has since succeeded him. Three weeks after taking office, in January 2023, Lula visited the Yanomami territory. What he saw were people reduced to skin and bones.

Images from his visit shocked Brazilians and made international headlines. Lula declared a public health emergency, blaming Bolsonaro for turning a blind eye to the miners and the devastation they caused. “It was a premeditated crime against the Yanomami,” Lula said.

The president also deployed a six-month special task force to stamp out illegal mining activities, as part of a \$200 million effort dubbed “Yanomami Shield.” “We must treat this as a matter of state,” Lula told a cabinet meeting last year. “We cannot lose the war against illegal miners and loggers.”

According to his government, the task force was able to expel 80 percent of the miners. But the victory was short-lived. As soon as Brazil’s armed forces left the region last August, Indigenous leaders say the miners made their comeback.

“Bolsonaro let the situation get out of control. Lula took matters in hand, but as soon as the army left, the invaders returned — this time, better prepared and using airstrips in Venezuela,” the younger Kopenawa said.

While Indigenous advocates have welcomed the changes under Lula, many feel his government has yet to follow through with its promises for a permanent solution to the problem. “The will is there, but we need better cooperation between the government agencies involved in solving the problem. The Defence Ministry, for example, did not do enough,” said Marcos Wesley, an Indigenous expert with the Brazil-based Socio-Environmental Institute (ISA).

Junior Hekurari, a Yanomami leader and health worker, said the government can help by offering Indigenous people more resources. “We need planes, helicopters and fuel to come and go,” he said. “We are constantly being threatened and attacked by armed miners.”

Hekurari himself has participated in rescue operations in Yanomami territory, as part of the Yanomami Hutukara Association, a network of local communities. He showed Al Jazeera a photo of one recent patient the group tried to help: a four-year-old Yanomami boy who lived close to the Venezuelan border. The boy was starving when the rescue team reached him. They transported the child to a nearby hospital, but it was too late: He died from his condition.

Deforestation has also slowed — but not stopped — under Lula. According to the Hutukara Association, 240 hectares (about 593 acres) of Yanomami land were destroyed last year. That is the equivalent of 200

football fields.

The problem stretches beyond Yanomami lands too. Beto Marubo, an Indigenous leader from the Javari Valley in western Brazil, said his people are likewise afflicted by incursions from illegal industry.

“We are all facing the same problem: a lack of protection for our territories, which are being occupied by organised criminal forces,” Marubo said.

But at the Carnival parade, with samba music pulsing from every street corner, Indigenous leaders were optimistic they could rally the public to their cause. As Kopenawa, the shaman, prepared to climb a steel ladder to reach his perch on a float, he observed that samba has the power to reach across cultures. After all, the music has roots in the African diaspora and has grown to become one of Brazil’s most iconic art forms.

“This is an alliance between our people and the people from Rio’s favelas,” he said of the Yanomami’s collaboration with the local samba club. “It’s the union of the Indigenous and Black souls.”

Kopenawa was set to be part of the parade’s showstopper: He and 12 other Yanomami members would ride the final float in the samba club’s procession. Leaders of three other Indigenous peoples also took part in the parade, which featured custom music created by the club.

“We are all here to conquer hearts and minds for our cause,” Indigenous activist and writer Ailton Krenak told Al Jazeera from the parade route. “It’s marvellous to see the Yanomami mythology and vision of the world being translated into a samba.”

“Many Yanomamis who are participating in the parade cannot even speak Portuguese. Yet they’re singing the lyrics of a samba written in their name and telling the world they still exist — and will resist.”

<https://www.radiohc.cu/en/noticias/cultura/347453-at-rios-carnival-yanomami-leaders-fight-genocide-with-samba>



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