

Brazil launches raids to oust illegal miners from Indigenous land

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Miners leave the Yanomami Indigenous territory on February 7 ahead of expected operations against illegal mining in Alto Alegre, Roraima state, Brazil, where the government declared a public health emergency for the Amazon's Yanomami people, who are suffering from

malnutrition and diseases such as malaria as a consequence of illegal mining [Edmar Barros/AP Photo]

Brasilia, February 9 (RHC)-- Brazil has launched raids against illegal gold miners blamed for a humanitarian crisis on the country's largest Indigenous reservation, as President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva promised to defend the Yanomami people after years of neglect and rising violence.

The Brazilian environmental and Indigenous agencies said on Wednesday that government agents were carrying out the operation, which began earlier this week.

The Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) said in a statement that agents destroyed a helicopter, a plane, a bulldozer and support structures for the miners on Yanomami land in Brazil's northernmost state of Roraima. Two weapons and three boats with about 5,000 litres (1,320 gallons) of fuel were also seized.

For years, Yanomami Indigenous leaders have said the expansion of illegal mining on their territories was causing widespread environmental degradation, as well as increased threats, violence, and disease.

Last year, the Hutukara Yanomami Association reported that the area scarred by "garimpo" – or wildcat gold mining – on the Yanomami reservation increased by 46 percent in 2021, to 3,272 hectares (8,085 acres).

"This is the worst moment of invasion since the reservation was established 30 years ago," the Indigenous rights group said in an April 2022 report, which was based on satellite images and interviews with local residents.

More than 20,000 miners are believed to have occupied the vast reservation, which is the size of Portugal and stretches across Roraima and Amazonas states in the northwest corner of Brazil's Amazon. The country's former far-right President Jair Bolsonaro had promoted increased development in the Amazon while his administration weakened the Brazilian environmental protection and Indigenous rights agencies.

The Yanomami, estimated to number approximately 28,000 people, have said Bolsonaro's policies helped spur the increased threats against them.

On Wednesday, IBAMA said a checkpoint was established next to a Yanomami village on the Uraricoera River to interrupt the miners' supply chain. Agents seized the 12-metre (39-foot) boats, loaded with a tonne of food, freezers, generators, and internet antennas, which will now supply the federal agents. No more boats carrying fuel and equipment will be allowed to proceed past the blockade.

Some of the miners are believed to have fled the Yanomami reservation before the operation began and crossed the border into neighbouring French Guiana, Suriname and Guyana. The federal government has declared a public health emergency for the Yanomami people, who are suffering from malnutrition and diseases such as malaria as a consequence of the illegal mining.

A report published this week by the Ministry of Health found that gold miners have invaded four clinics inside Yanomami territory, leaving them inoperational. In the city of Boa Vista, where starving and sick Indigenous community members have been air-lifted to a temporary medical facility, there are 700 Yanomami people, more than three times the facility's capacity.

"The malnutrition crisis continues to be extremely serious. We believe the reopening of medical units can only be done when the miners are all removed," Indigenous Health Secretary Ricardo Weibe Tapeba said during a news conference.

Later on Tuesday, President Lula said on Twitter that his government would not allow illegal mining on Indigenous lands, which led the Yanomamis to a “degrading” situation. “We also need to find out who is responsible for what happened,” he said.

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