Indigenous peoples in Brazil fight against government policies... and the pandemic

From its first day in office, the government led by Jair Bolsonaro has been trying to undermine the constitutional rights of Indigenous Peoples and quilombola communities in Brazil. The pandemic is serving as a cover to further escalate these attacks. WRM spoke with the organization CIMI in the Western Amazon.

"Without effective actions to contain the pandemic among the (indigenous) peoples, this government will also be labeled as genocidal."
CIMI, June 2020

At a cabinet meeting held in April 2020 in Brasilia, Environment Minister Ricardo Salles was caught on video stating that the focus of the public and the media on the Covid-19 pandemic, which has to date officially killed more than 65,000 people in the country, offers a distraction during which the government can "run the cattle herd" through the Amazon "by changing all the rules and simplifying standards." (1) The video was made public in May 2020.

The reality is that the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro is trying to dismantle, and as quickly as possible, the rules that protect the forests and the constitutional rights of Indigenous Peoples and *quilombolas* (communities formed by people subjected to slavery who managed to escape captivity), as well as the country's system of environmental protections. This will have grave consequences throughout the country, especially in the Amazon, which is the region with the greatest forest coverage and presence of Indigenous Peoples. It should not be forgotten that the Bolsonaro government has acted in this way since its first day in power. (2) The current pandemic serves as a cover to further intensify these brutal attacks on the forests, along with the peoples and communities that depend on it.

In Brazil, official figures of those infected with Covid-19 among the indigenous population certainly do not reflect the true extent of the pandemic. According to the Articulation of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB in its Portuguese acronym), up to June 2020, more than 420 indigenous people had died of Covid-19 and over 11,300 were infected in more than 120 communities. (3)

This is an unmitigated disaster for Indigenous Peoples, given that each group has its own culture and histories, and many of their leaders, especially the elders, who are the keepers of memory and knowledge of these peoples, are disappearing because of the pandemic. However, the way in which the authorities have dealt with this crisis clearly shows how the Bolsonaro government has in fact become a deadly enemy for these peoples and their life territories.

The Munduruku alone, who are one of the 305 peoples that inhabit Brazil, have lost ten of their *sabios* or wise ones. "We always say they are living libraries", said Alessandra Korab Munduruku, a tribal leader, "It has been very painful." (4) In June 2020, Chief Raoni of the Kayapó people accused President Jair Bolsonaro of taking advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic in order to "eradicate his people". Likewise, chief Ninawa of the Huni Kui people, who had also been infected with Covid-19,

fears that the disease will spread among his people. (5)

Along with the increase in the number of Indigenous Peoples infected and killed by Covid-19, is the rise in the assassinations of indigenous leaders, as well as invasions of their territories by loggers, miners, evangelical missionaries and land grabbers. And certainly the risks for Indigenous Peoples are greater today due to the current context and the likelihood that such invaders could infect members of the communities. Given the characteristics of their collective coexistence, as shared among most of these peoples, such an epidemic could well lead to genocide, reminding us of events that took place in the not-so-distant past during the continent's colonial period.

In April, the Bolsonaro government issued Legal Instruction 9 (*Instrução Normativa Nº 9*), which basically legalized the crime of land-grabbing of indigenous territories. This was an unconstitutional and criminal act that further aggravates violence against Indigenous Peoples and fosters even more environmental crimes. (6)

Between March and April 2020, in the Javari Valley of the Amazonas state, foreign evangelical missionaries organized helicopter flights with the aim of ‘reaching out’ to uncontacted indigenous tribes. All taking place in the midst of a global pandemic, and when the same foreign organizations had just gained a powerful ally in the Brazilian government. In February, and prior to any form of social distancing, the Bolsonaro government appointed evangelical missionary Ricardo Lopes Dias, a former member of the New Tribes Mission of Brazil, to head the department responsible for uncontacted indigenous tribes of FUNAI (the Brazilian government’s National Indian Foundation). The appointment was heavily criticized by indigenous organizations and members of civil society, and even attracted the attention of the Federal Public Defenders Office. (7)

Deforestation + pandemic + fire + militarization

According to a study carried out by researchers from Brazil’s National Institute for Space Research (INPE in its Portuguese acronym) and the National Center for Monitoring and Early Warning of Natural Disasters (CEMADEN in its Portuguese acronym), the deforestation rate between August 2019 and May 2020 already represented 89% of the land deforested the previous year, and that was even before the start of the driest season with the highest rate of forest fires. As the climate becomes ever drier, the burning of already deforested areas may well cause uncontrollable fires to break out. The same study also reveals that from August 2019 to May 2020, 78,443 fire outbreaks were detected in the Amazon region, representing an increase compared to the same period between 2018 and 2019. The study concludes that with ever more fires and the consequent increase of patients with respiratory ailments, added to the large number of patients with Covid-19, there will be a higher demand placed on healthcare services, which could lead to their collapse in the states of the Amazon region. And these same services are already operating at full capacity due to the pandemic. (8)

Another concern is the increasing militarization of the Amazon. This is due to the large number of armed forces personnel who occupy leading positions in environmental agencies and other government bodies dealing with indigenous issues. Not forgetting that it is the country’s military who have been tasked with coordinating the Bolsonaro government's supposed policy to fight deforestation.

In a country where the Indigenous Peoples, in addition to facing the on-going health emergency, also have to cope with structural racism, WRM spoke with the representatives of the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI in its Portuguese acronym), of the regional unit of the Western Amazon.

Since its foundation in 1972, CIMI has played a major role in facilitating coordination between the villages and the Indigenous Peoples, which resulted in the promotion of large indigenous assemblies, even during the country's last military dictatorship (1964-1985). Hundreds of indigenous organizations emerged from this process, which also strengthened the fight to guarantee their rights and the process to set boundaries to the country's indigenous territories.

WRM: What is the general situation in the Brazilian Amazon regarding Covid-19 and Indigenous Peoples? How are the peoples and their organizations dealing with the pandemic?

CIMI: The lack of assistance from the government is striking, along with insufficient preparation by the Special Secretariat for Indigenous Healthcare, SESAI. This lack of support becomes even more relevant because the distances in the Amazon are so huge. This means that countless communities and villages are not receiving any support whatsoever. Indigenous Peoples and their organizations have done everything possible to cope with the pandemic. They're working mainly on the dissemination of preventive measures and in advising people how to take the necessary personal precautions. In the case of indigenous populations, preventive measures need to be more specific, given that each group has its own customs and they even have different community traditions and rituals.

WRM: It's clear that from the first day he took office, President Bolsonaro has been attacking the Indigenous Peoples head on. From your perspective, what is the objective of the actions and measures adopted by this government?

CIMI: The Bolsonaro government has three main lines of attack in terms of the rights of Indigenous Peoples: 1) it acts against the constitution, or rather, modifying constitutional provisions and completely ignoring articles 231 and 232 of the Brazilian Constitution; 2) it acts against the issue of territories, that is to say, not to demarcate the territories that are being processed, questioning those already demarcated and opening up these same territories to the land market; 3) finally, it acts to "integrate" the (indigenous) peoples, falling back on the military's old policy of national integration. Based on these three lines of intervention, the President intends to simply annihilate the Indigenous Peoples and open up their territories to the land market and mining exploitation.

WRM: There is an increase in the invasions of indigenous territories and in the threats and violence against these peoples and their defenders, including CIMI. What's happening in terms of the pandemic? Are the invaders the same or are there others?

CIMI: They are the same and others are joining them. To get a clearer idea of ??what's happening, out of the total properties registered in the Environmental Registry of Rural Properties (CAR, in its Portuguese acronym), a countrywide public electronic registry, which is mandatory for all rural properties, almost ten thousand properties have been overlapped onto indigenous lands in different stages of regularization or on areas of restricted use. This has been indicated in the survey released by the Chamber of Indigenous Populations and Traditional Communities of the Federal Public Ministry (6CCR / MPF). In the State of Acre alone, 132 private property records were identified in the CAR, and all of them were in indigenous areas. The physical invasions themselves take place in three stages as follows: during the first year, the invaders organize a kind of expedition into the area to be invaded and assess its possible uses, according to their intentions and interests (timber, grasslands, sugarcane, minerals, soy, etc.); the following year they deforest the land and only in the third year do they start burning. In this way, the invasions detected today may have begun in 2018. This strategy aims to make any accusations more difficult, given that the directors of government inspection bodies are frequently being reassigned, which causes a constant restart of the processes

and the annulment of previous actions. This lack of control is then blamed on the former directors. At the other extreme, the government has created mechanisms so that the legalization of these invaded areas becomes effective.

WRM: How is the government and its allies taking advantage of the pandemic to advance their historical agendas, seeking to pass measures or laws that directly violate the rights of Indigenous Peoples over their territories and cultures?

CIMI: The government has taken advantage of this time of pandemic in which such peoples do not have the chance to organize themselves and carry out protests, as they must remain on their lands and in their communities. This makes it really difficult to follow up on the measures adopted in Brasilia (the seat of the federal government). Furthermore, the debating sessions or votes on legislation in the Congress are virtual, making any oversight by the Indigenous Peoples and their allies even more difficult. The strategy is the one stated by the Ministry of Environment: to take advantage of the crisis so as to "sweep away" regulations and simplify the laws.

WRM: How can people and organizations inside and outside of Brazil support the struggle of the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon in these difficult times?

CIMI: The best way to show solidarity with the Indigenous Peoples in these difficult times is to inform the international community of these violations of their rights. Whenever we have had the opportunity to meet with Indigenous Peoples during this period, we have coordinated the dissemination of documents and videos to the emails of deputies, senators and ministers. We are witnessing a true act of genocide and ethnocide against the Indigenous Peoples and this situation must be brought to the attention of the international mechanisms that defend human rights.