

Gold rush fuels armed violence in Brazilian Amazon

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BBC News
Published
7 hours ago



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It is estimated that illegal mining destroyed an area equivalent to 500 football fields in the Yanomami territory in 2020

At around midday on 11 May, Dario Kopenawa, an indigenous leader, received a desperate phone call from a remote village in the Brazilian Amazon. Palimiú has a population of about 1,000, and they live in large communal houses on the banks of a river called Uraricoera. You can only reach it by plane, or after a long journey on a boat. Kopenawa, who is from the Yanomami tribe, is used to hearing pleas for help from communities in the rainforest, but this one was different. "They attacked us," a man said, "they almost killed us". They, Kopenawa was told, were *garimpeiros*, or illegal gold miners, who had arrived on seven motorboats, some carrying automatic weapons, and started shooting indiscriminately.

Hiding behind trees, the Yanomami fought back, using shotguns and bows. An indigenous man was grazed by a bullet in the head, Kopenawa learned, and four miners were injured. The attackers left after half an hour, but threatened to come back for revenge. Terrified, women fled into the dense jungle with their children to seek refuge. It was chaotic, and two boys, aged one and five, drowned.

Palimiú, located deep in the state of Roraima, sits on Brazil's largest indigenous reserve, which has an area similar to Portugal and 27,000 people. Mining is illegal there, but prospectors have always found ways to do their work.

"*Garimpeiros* are all over the place," Kopenawa told me. He avoids going to areas where they are because of death threats and, after the call, he alerted the authorities, saying something had to be done.

The next day, a team of federal police travelled to Palimiú on a small plane, and were joined by Junior Hekukari, who heads the local indigenous health council. As he was leaving the area, Hekukari spotted some boats drifting with their engines switched off, and he guessed they were trying to avoid being noticed. As the men in the vessels approached, they shot multiple times at the village.

"The agents screamed 'Police, police'," Hekukari told me, "but they didn't stop. They had no respect". The officers responded, and there was an intense gun fight. The group left five minutes later and nobody was injured. When Hekukari reported what had happened, Kopenawa was stunned. If even the police were being attacked, he said, none of his people was safe.



A video shared by Junior Hekukari shows what appears to be a motorboat passing by Palimiú, when a shootout starts

The intrusions by *garimpeiros* in indigenous reserves have intensified under far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who plans to open some of the areas to mining and agriculture. Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), a non-profit group, estimates there are about 20,000 of them in the Yanomami territory alone, and Hekukari told me "they do what they want because they know nothing will happen to them".

Alisson Marugal, the federal prosecutor in Roraima, said they had been encouraged by a surge in gold prices and an order by Funai, the government's indigenous affairs agency, that limited field work because of the pandemic. "Illegal miners did not self-isolate or do social distancing," he said. "In fact, they intensified their activities."

The reserves are one of the most effective ways to protect the Amazon, the world's largest rainforest and a huge carbon store that helps slow down global warming. But President Bolsonaro, a climate change sceptic who is supported by powerful agribusiness leaders, considers them too big for the number of people who live there and an obstacle to development.

The president, whose own father was a *garimpeiro*, is particularly critical of the extension of the Yanomami territory, established in 1992 in a region where vast mineral riches are located. Kopenawa, who lives in the state capital Boa Vista where he leads the indigenous association called Hutakara, said "Bolsonaro supports the *garimpeiros*" and had no interest in protecting the Yanomami. "Our territory is being disrespected," he said. "And our calls for help are not being heard."

In Congress, the Bolsonaro government is pushing an agenda that opponents warn poses an existential threat to the Amazon and, consequently, to indigenous people. The Chamber of Deputies is due to vote on a bill that would legalise the private occupation of public land. Another proposal could pave the way for the reduction of indigenous areas that already exist.

"Illegal miners have been emboldened... by a discourse that legitimises their work," Prosecutor Marugal said. "Indigenous communities are under extreme pressure".



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ISA released pictures, taken in April, of the destruction caused by mining in the Yanomami reserve



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The intrusions by illegal miners in protected reserves have increased under President Jair Bolsonaro

'It's obvious there's no political will'

Kopenawa is the son of the respected shaman and leader David Kopenawa, who led the campaign that resulted in the creation of the Yanomami reserve. Nicknamed the Dalai Lama of the Rainforest, he told me when we met in 2014: "White men who have money, want more. They want to destroy more. That's their tradition: they've got no limit."

Last year, illegal mining devastated an area equivalent to 500 football fields on Yanomami land, according to ISA, and is likely to result in even more destruction this year. *Garimpeiros* have also polluted rivers with mercury, which is used to separate gold from mud, and are blamed for bringing alcohol, drugs and, most recently, Covid-19, into the communities.

If it is no secret where they are, why are they not being removed? "It's obvious there's no political will," a former official at Funai, who quit last year because he "couldn't stand it anymore," told me. "There are some powerful people involved in illegal mining who may be able to limit or prevent any action." Raids by Funai, which has suffered successive budget cuts, are carried out with the federal police, the army and Ibama, the environmental protection agency. They are so irregular, the former official added, that their impact is very limited and the *garimpeiros* quickly go back.

Joenia Wapichana, the only indigenous member of parliament and a representative of Roraima, pointed to an ideological change at the agency, currently led by a federal police officer with links to agribusiness. "Funai used to be a friend of the indigenous people," she told me. Now, she said, they oppose demands by local communities and even ask the police to investigate indigenous leaders who are critical of them.

Funai said there was no-one available for an interview, and President Bolsonaro's office did not respond to requests for comment.



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A boat carrying petrol and other goods crosses the Uraricoera river inside the Yanomami reserve

As the pandemic raged in the Amazon last year, the Yanomami created a barrier on the Uraricoera, Roraima's longest river, in an effort to stop the transit of boats around Palimiú. They believe the May attack was in retaliation after they intercepted a vessel and seized petrol and equipment.

Audio messages shared in a WhatsApp group believed to be used by illegal miners suggested the attackers were affiliated to a *facção*, or criminal organisation. One of Brazil's largest gangs, the First Command of the Capital, or PCC for its initials in Portuguese, is known to operate in Roraima, a sparsely populated state situated on drug trafficking routes.

Alisson Marugal said the suspicion was that criminals had been hired to protect the mining fields, and that they were believed to be behind the recent violence. "We're seeing some heavy weapons arriving in the camps," he told me. He described some areas as "no-man's land".

Five days after the police visit, Palimiú was attacked again, Kopenawa said. At night, people arrived on several boats and started shooting. They also fired what appeared to be tear gas, and the Yanomami despaired when they felt their eyes and

throats burn. "My people thought they were being bombed," he said.

Earlier, this week, the Supreme Court ordered the Bolsonaro government to take measures to protect the village and other indigenous communities, and to remove the *garimpeiros* from the areas.

But Kopenawa said the Yanomami were tired of waiting. "We're under threat," he said. "Our patience has ended."