

Brazil says illegal miners driven from Indigenous territory, but ‘war’ not over

Country’s top cop said 90% of miners despoiling Yanomami land had been expelled, though experts say they are only displaced

Tom Phillips in Belém and Bram Ebus in Leticia

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A member of the Brazilian environmental agency looks at a burning aircraft belonging to illegal miners in Yanomami territory on 6 February 2023. Photograph: IBAMA/AFP/Getty Images

Brazil’s top federal police chief for the Amazon has celebrated the government’s success in driving thousands of illegal miners from the country’s largest Indigenous territory but warned the “war” against environmental criminals is not yet over.

Speaking during a visit to the Amazon city of Belém, Humberto Freire estimated environmental and police special forces had expelled 90% of the 20,000 miners who had been devastating the protected Yanomami territory, since launching their clampdown in February.



‘A war society doesn’t see’: the Brazilian force driving out mining gangs from Indigenous lands

Freire, who was appointed after Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva became president in January, said the eviction of those *garimpeiros* was bearing fruit. “In April 2022, we received 444 mine-related deforestation alerts. In April 2023, it was 19 – a reduction of more than 95%. In May, there were 10 alerts and in the first half of June none at all. So we’ve seen a significant reduction.”

Images released by Brazil’s armed forces last week showed the waters of the Uraricoera River, which runs through the Portugal-sized Indigenous enclave, had become dramatically less cloudy, purportedly as a result of the destruction of illegal mines.

But Freire, director of the newly created federal police department for the environment and Amazon, warned that 1,500-2,000 cassiterite and gold miners remained and were resisting. “We can’t think that the battle is won [and] that this war is over,” he said, vowing to launch “focused, surgical” operations to dislodge the remaining miners and to continue attacking the criminal enterprises employing them.

There was a brutal reminder of the challenges authorities still face last week when a **Yanomami child was shot dead** and five others, including an Indigenous leader, were injured during an attack on a Yanomami village. It was the latest in a **series of deadly incidents** to hit the territory since the eviction campaign began.



Brazilian Amazon at risk of being taken over by mafia, ex-police chief warns

But there was also evidence that renewed efforts to slow environmental crime across the Amazon are paying off as authorities announced a **33.6% drop** in deforestation in the first six months of Lula's administration.

"My government will eliminate illegal deforestation by 2030," Lula told a meeting in the Colombian city of Leticia on Saturday, suggesting all nine Amazonian countries could unite around that goal at a major regional summit in Belém next month.

Lula ordered the Yanomami crackdown after taking office in January following four years of soaring deforestation and rampant illegal mining under his far-right predecessor Jair Bolsonaro.

Indigenous activists have greeted the government's claims of progress with caution, warning that the battle against the illegal prospectors will only be over once every single miner has left.



A boat with mining supplies traverses the Uraricoera River in Roraima state, Brazil, on 7 February 2023. Photograph: Amanda Perobelli/Reuters

"There's still mining in the Yanomami territory, perhaps on a smaller scale, but it's still going on," said Junior Nicácio Wapichana, a lawyer from the Indigenous Council of Roraima. "Our view is that the only way of ensuring the safety of Indigenous leaders is by completely removing the miners. This is the first step. The second step is how to recover this territory which has been destroyed and had its rivers poisoned."

Activists also warn that while miners may be retreating from Yanomami territories in Brazil, Yanomami communities over the border in Venezuela continue to suffer.

Recently released images from the Venezuela-focused environmental group SOS Orinoco showed three clusters of mines just a few kilometres across the border from one of the most devastated Yanomami areas in Brazil.

"These mines are growing by the day," said the group's director, Cristina Burelli, who believed miners were relocating to Venezuela as a result of Brazil's operations.

"I call it the Lula balloon effect," Burellia said. "Lula is cracking down ... [but] because of the crackdown on the Brazilian side, the *garimpeiros* are coming over the border into Venezuela where they know they are going to have safe haven and they are going to do business."

Luis Betancourt, the director of the Venezuela-based Amazon Research Group GRIAM, said illegal miners had expanded their presence in Yanomami lands in the Venezuelan municipality of Alto Orinoco over the last five years.



Venezuela's gold fever fuels gangs and insecurity: 'There will be anarchy'

At first, the miners were concentrated at the headwaters of the Orinoco River. But Betancourt said they had gradually advanced downstream to the Ocamo region – remote borderlands that can only be reached by plane or helicopter. Betancourt said the miners bribed Yanomami villagers with guns, alcohol and drugs in order to secure workers and access to their lands.

In recent weeks, Venezuela's authoritarian president, Nicolás Maduro, has trumpeted a military operation to evict thousands of illegal miners from another part of the Venezuelan Amazon, [the Yapacana national park](#), near the Colombian border.

On Tuesday, Maduro [said](#) thousands of troops were battling to halt the “abominable damage” caused by prospectors. “We will go all the way ... and we will win the battle,” he tweeted.

But Burelli saw no moves to stop mining in Yanomami areas and called Maduro's high-profile Yapacana crackdown a “big show” designed to ensure he could travel to Lula's Belém summit posing as “a defender of the Amazon”.

Critics accuse Maduro of unleashing a wave of Amazon destruction, particularly since 2016 when his government launched a push into the so-called “mining arc” region in a bid to revive Venezuela's moribund economy.