

Exclusive: Amazon Indigenous chief Raoni warns of disaster if deforestation not stopped

By Leonardo Benassatto and Ueslei Marcelino

August 6, 2023 12:03 PM GMT+12 Updated 4 hours ago



[1/5]Brazil's indigenous chief Raoni Metuktire poses for a photo during an interview before a summit of Amazon rainforest nations at the Igarape Park, in Belem, Para state, Brazil August 5, 2023. REUTERS/Ueslei Marcelino



[5/5] Brazil's indigenous chief Raoni Metuktire speaks during the event Dialogos da Amazonia (Amazon Dialogues) before a summit of Amazon rainforest nations at the Igarape Park, in Belem, Para state, Brazil, August 4, 2023. REUTERS/Ueslei Marcelino

BELEM, Brazil, Aug 5 (Reuters) - Raoni Metuktire, an Indigenous chief from Brazil's Amazon, will urge the region's head of state meeting here this coming week to step up their efforts to preserve the rainforest that is vital to his people's survival and the global climate.

"I will ask the presidents to commit to guaranteeing the preservation of the forest," he told Reuters.

Raoni said threats to the rainforest have decreased since President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva took office in January, but the danger for Indigenous people is now the Brazilian Congress, where the farm

lobby is pushing legislation to end further recognition of their ancestral lands.

"There are many Indigenous communities that do not have demarcation and even though the president is in favor of demarcating Indigenous lands, what I hear most are threats, speeches and statements against demarcation in Congress," he said in an interview. Raoni, an unmistakable figure with his large lip plate and yellow feather headdress, is a chief of the Kayapo people, an Indigenous group that lives along the Xingu River where savannah plains meet the Amazon rainforest.

Their reservation, the Xingu National Park, has become encircled by expanding soy plantations and cattle ranches that dry up rivers that are being polluted by illegal gold miners.

"The deforestation of the Amazon's forests is not good for us Indigenous peoples, and white man needs to rethink and preserve what remains of the Amazon," he warned.

The eight countries of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) will meet on Tuesday and Wednesday in Belem, a city at the mouth of the Amazon, to seek to cooperate across their borders to combat deforestation, protect Indigenous peoples and encourage sustainable development in the face of climate change. Senior officials from the U.S. and France will attend.

Raoni said his people are feeling the impact of climate change.

"Many rivers are drying up. We are feeling very hot and the temperature in the villages is very high, and there is little rain," he said.

Raoni, who is believed to be 91, said his ancestors believed that one day there would be no rain and a big fire on Earth would consume the human race.

"This myth is a message for you white people. You need to understand that if you don't preserve the forest, we will all have problems, all of us!" he added.

The Kayapo leader, who became globally known for his environmental campaigning in the 1980s with musician Sting at his side, said he has visions of disaster.

"The spirits tell me that if this type of human action continues, they will act with great force and then we will have very big problems," he said.

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