

# Brazil launches biggest ever operation against illegal cattle farms in Amazon

## Taskforce deployed to remove thousands of cows owned by land grabbers from indigenous territory

*Rafael Moro in Senador José Porfírio*

Tue 5 Sep 2023 12.23 BST



Operation Eراها Tapiro is removing thousands of cows in an effort to restore state control over the Ituna-Itatá Indigenous Territory. Photograph: Lela Beltrão/Lela Beltrão/Sumaúma.

The Brazilian government has launched its biggest ever operation to remove thousands of cows owned by illegal land grabbers from indigenous territory in the **Amazon rainforest**.

Three helicopters, a dozen vehicles and a heavily armed corps of police and environment rangers are carrying out the cattle drive, which criminal gangs attempted to block by setting fires on the route, destroying bridges and intimidating drivers.

Operation Eراها Tapiro (“Ox Removal” in the language of the Assurini Indigenous people) aims to restore state control over the Ituna-Itatá Indigenous

Territory, which suffered some of the worst deforestation and invasions in the Amazon during the previous presidency of the nationalist Jair Bolsonaro.

Since a change of power at the start of this year, the leftwing president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, has promised to curb environmental crime, halt the expansion of the agricultural frontier and aim for zero deforestation by 2030. The environment minister, Marina Silva, has **launched a series of operations to drive illegal miners and ranchers out of indigenous territory** and other public lands that are under the protection of the state.

The operation commander, Givanildo Lima, who is an agent for the government's main environmental protection agency, Ibama, said this was a politically symbolic operation on the frontline of environmental crime in the Amazonian state of Pará.



The operation is being carried out by dozens of vehicles and armed government agents. Photograph: Lela Beltrão/Lela Beltrão/Sumaúma.

“The deforestation of Ituna-Itatá was planned and executed by a gang that had great political power. Making this operation successful demonstrates our ability to fight crime in the Amazon, which is increasingly organised,” he said

A coalition of federal agencies were involved, including Ibama, federal police, traffic police, the indigenous affairs agency and the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity **Conservation**.

A government study in 2011 took a step to formally demarcate the Ituna-Itatá Indigenous Territory, an area of 142,000 hectares, approximately the size of Greater London, that was the home of an isolated community, the Igarapé Ipiaçava. Once this process begins, the state prohibits non-Indigenous people from entering the area.

To defy this and weaken the application, local land grabbers – known as *grileiros* – started invading the area, burning the forest and filling the land with cows. This accelerated so much during the Bolsonaro presidency that Ituna-Itatá was the most deforested indigenous area in the entire Amazon in 2019.

Ibama officials said the Rocha farm, where the operation began, is owned by a man named Danilo José Barros Rocha, who has houses in Marabá and Altamira, the two largest cities in the region. According to Adepará records, Rocha owns only 70 animals.

However, inspectors found 400 cattle in the area of 800 hectares (330 hectares of which are deforested) that he illegally took over and registered in the Rural Environmental Registry. He was told his claim was illegal and ordered to remove the cattle last year. As he failed to comply, his herd will be removed and he will be fined 500,000 Brazilian real (£80,000). Similar penalties are being applied to other land grabbers in the area, whose lucrative illegal farms cover vast expanses of the indigenous territory.

As soon as the Ibama operation started last week, word rapidly spread on *grileiro* WhatsApp groups in the village of Vila Mocotó, part of Coronel José Porfírio municipality.

The village, which is just 18 miles (30km) from Ituna-Itatá, is a handful of streets of bare earth with a few dozen houses, most of them very simple and built in wood. These are the homes of the people who look after the cattle on behalf of wealthy land grabbers, who control local politics and have strong influence in the national congress.



Criminals have tried to impede the removal of the herds by setting fires along the route. Photograph: Lela Beltrão/Lela Beltrão/Sumaúma.

Among their most avid supporters is senator Zequinha Marinho, who is a Bolsonaro ally and a pastor of the evangelical church Assembly of God, who sent a letter last year to the government describing environmental agents in the Ituna-Itatá area as “bandits and scoundrels” and denying there were any isolated Indigenous peoples in the area despite evidence to the contrary from anthropologists, settlers and other Indigenous groups.

In a statement to the Guardian, his office reasserted that Ituna-Itatá was not an indigenous land and said: “Senator Zequinha Marinho defends and will continue to defend the rights of farming families who have lived for decades in the area known as Ituna-Itatá and adjacent areas.”

The operation commander said the confiscation of the cattle would weaken the land grabbers’ economic power, which would, in turn, deplete their political influence. “The main cause of deforestation in this region has always been cattle. So, just apprehending the herds, causing financial loss to the invaders, can solve the problem,” Lima said.

However, compliance is weak, and many land grabbers go unpunished if they ignore environmental fines.

As the operation’s convoy of cars and trucks drove past, residents of Vila Mocotó gathered in doorways to stare at the federal agents who threatened their

livelihoods. There was no armed resistance, but they attempted other ways to impede the removal of the herds.

Fires were started at several points alongside the route to scare the cows. One wooden bridge was destroyed by arson. Another was cut into pieces with chainsaws. Most of the drivers of the cattle trucks were scared off.

The federal agents rebuilt the bridges and managed to ensure the first cows were transported at midnight across the Xingu River for slaughter in Altamira. Their meat will be donated to social programmes.

Ibama estimates it will take weeks for the remaining 5,000 cows to be taken from the indigenous land.