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Brazil

The Amazon under the Bolsonaro government: environmental devastation and attacks on indigenous peoples

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One of the most striking features of the first year of Jair Bolsonaro's government was its "anti-environmental" policy, which was covered by the international press following the senseless remarks made by the President of the Republic and his Minister of the Environment, Ricardo Salles. This policy has manifested itself in numerous scandals, such as the increase in deforestation and burning in the Amazon rainforest, as well as attacks against indigenous (Amerindian) peoples, illustrated by the assassination of Amerindian leaders, such as those belonging to the Guajajara (in the state of Maranhão) and Waiãpi (in the state of Amapá) peoples. The number of murders of members of indigenous peoples is the highest in the last 11 years, with 7 leaders assassinated by order of the Capital, this year alone.

Deforestation and violence against indigenous peoples are phenomena that go hand in hand, since illegal logging, grilagem (illegal land grabbing by falsification of property titles) and illegal garimpos (mining, gold and other mining) [[1](#)]

are carried out to a large extent precisely after the invasion of indigenous lands by criminal businessmen and with the endorsement of the anti-indigenous and anti-environmental discourse of the authorities, represented by the Salles and Bolsonaro.

The attacks against the Amazonian environment and the indigenous peoples began on the first day of the Bolsonaro government with the attempt to close down the Ministry of the Environment (MMA-Ministério do Meio Ambiente), a move that Bolsonaro had to abandon due to its more than negative fallout. Since he could not simply abolish the MMA, he chose to make it more open to the interests of the latifundium and agribusiness. The dismissal of the Ministry's technical staff and the blocking of initiatives such as the environmental protection programmes resulted in a 24% reduction in the budget of IBAMA (Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources) for the year 2019 and a 34% reduction in the fines imposed by this public agency on those responsible for deforestation, in the first half of 2019 alone.

Another example of this government's disregard for global warming was the cancellation of COP25, the world's largest climate change event, to be held in Brazil [[2](#)]. In addition, throughout the year, the government attacked the Amazon Fund (International Fund to Fight Deforestation), making it impossible to use the resources collected [in August 2019, the Fund halted its project]. In addition, the government created a regulatory body to review and cancel environmental fines.

While the current government's attacks on the Amazon may have had strong international repercussions, more significant have been the sharp increase in deforestation rates and the resignation of former INPE (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas) president Ricardo Galvão [a renowned physicist], who was accused by the President of the Republic [at a press conference on 19 July 2019, followed by international media] of lying about the published data. The Amazonian forest burned between mid-2018 and mid-2019, resulting in an 88% increase (in terms of area burned) compared to the previous year. So much so that a city like São Paulo felt the effects of smoke and low humidity (rain) as a collateral effect of the fires.

This policy of death and destruction was also reflected in the irresponsible permission given by the Ministry of Agriculture to spray massive amounts of pesticide. In the first half of 2019 alone, 239 new pesticides were authorized by the government, including at least 14 substances that are banned in other countries.

With regard to the indigenous issue, it should be stressed that the government is radically opposed to the demarcation (delimitation) of indigenous lands with what that means for their right to determine what happens on this line. On the contrary, its intentions, expressed several times throughout the year, are none other than to allow mining on these lands.

Bolsonaro tried, but was fortunately defeated twice (once before the Federal Supreme Court and once by the Federal Chamber) over his plan to withdraw the allocation of the delimitation of indigenous lands from the FUNAI (National Indian Foundation) and hand it over to the Ministry of Agriculture. However, as Bolsonaro himself has said repeatedly, with his government there will not be a millimetre of land for the indigenous (Amerindians). On the contrary, his minions have been studying, from the first day of his inauguration, a way to reduce conservation units and protected lands, including recognized Indigenous Lands [the 1988 Constitution guarantees Amerindians an inalienable right to live on and own their ancestral lands]. This is in order to allow economic exploitation, particularly mining, in these protected territories. If this measure is effectively adopted and approved, 215 indigenous territories, occupying an area equivalent to 8 million football fields in the legal Amazon, could be devastated. The state and para-state policy of genocide of the Amerindian peoples could reach its climax due to the multiplication of agrarian and socio-environmental conflicts.

All these attacks are aimed at establishing a new level of exploitation of nature, incompatible with the existence of indigenous peoples and the preservation of the forest, water and land in one of the most important ecosystems on the planet. Bolsonaro wants to turn the Amerindians into "entrepreneurs" and the natural resources that are still intact into commodities available for capitalist predation. The current president of Brazil is a threat to the existence of the planet and must be stopped. (Article published on Esquerda online)

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[1] On 25 July 2019, BBC News Brasil (João Feillet and Camilla Costa) published an article based on satellite images that "reveal a recent expansion of illegal garimpos on indigenous lands in the Amazon: it has been taking place since January 2019. Indigenous people and environmentalists attribute this advance - observed in different parts of Pará and Roraima - to statements by President Jair Bolsonaro in favour of mining on indigenous lands and what they see as a weakening of the government's fight against environmental crimes.

This growth in mining hot spots comes at a time when the INPE (National Institute for Space Research) is showing a high rate of destruction in the Amazon and is having its work questioned by the president, who believes that the release of data on deforestation could harm the country in international negotiations". (Editor's note)

[2] Brazil announced on Wednesday 28 November 2018 that it would not host the COP25 climate summit in 2019, the year in which far-right President-elect Jair Bolsonaro takes office. Brazil's new strongman is known for his climate-sceptical stance. "Due to budgetary restrictions [...] and the transition process with the new administration that will take office on 1 January 2019, the Brazilian government was forced to withdraw its offer to host COP25," the Foreign Ministry explained in a statement. Aloysio Nunez (Brazilian Social Democracy Party) was then Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade. (Editor's note)