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Gruesome Indigenous Killings in Brazilian Amazon Highlight Federal Budget Cuts

by Gregory Scruggs

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Less than a decade after Brazilian officials made contact with a previously isolated indigenous tribe in the Amazon, tragedy has struck. Since August, news has trickled out about alleged violent contact between gold prospectors and the tribespeople in the remote Javari Valley, an area roughly the size of Portugal that is home to one of Brazil's largest indigenous reserves. Reportedly, a group of indigenous people were out gathering eggs near the Jandiatuba River when they ran into a group of miners. An altercation ensued, and more than 20 indigenous people were killed.

The Brazilian federal agency for indigenous matters, Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI), announced that it had formally filed a petition with the federal prosecutor's office on Sep. 11, which had confirmed the deaths two days prior. The release indicated that the miners had been apprehended by federal authorities and interrogated in Tabatinga, the nearest municipality, but that they did not admit to the crime. As of yet, no concrete evidence has been found. However, the miners allegedly bragged about the killings at a bar near the Colombian border and showed off a hand-carved paddle as a trophy.

The Vale do Javari Indigenous Territory comprises over 85,000 square kilometers and is home to approximately 3,000 indigenous people from tribes that have had varying levels of contact with non-indigenous people. FUNAI estimates that at least 2,000 people belonging to 14 tribes have yet to be contacted by Westerners. The territory is in an extremely remote part of Amazonas state, located near the Peruvian and Colombian borders. Federal investigators must travel 12 days by boat in order to reach the site of the alleged massacre, a distance of 1,000 km from Manaus, the state capital.

Budget cuts

While details are sketchy at this phase given the remoteness of the site in question, the allegations are grim. FUNAI's Leila Sílvia Burger Sotto-Maior told *The New York Times* that the killers had "bragged about cutting up the bodies and throwing them in the river." The miners allegedly said that they'd had to "kill them or be killed."

Indigenous rights activists are already seizing on the incident as proof that federal cuts approved by President Michel Temer ([NotiSur, March 24, 2017](#), and [Aug. 18, 2017](#)) are having a devastating effect on Brazil's indigenous population. Temer, who has imposed harsh austerity measures on the federal government, reduced FUNAI's uncontacted tribes departmental budget from R\$7.5 million (US\$2.4 million) in 2014 to just R\$2 million (US\$640,000) this year.

That move led to the closure of five of the agency's 19 bases, which are designed to ward off illegal invasions by logging and mining interests as well as to maintain trained lines of communication with tribes that have been recently contacted. Three of the closed bases were in the Vale do Javari.

"If these reports are confirmed, President Temer and his government are largely responsible for this genocidal act," the NGO Survival International said in a statement. "All of these tribes have

deserved for years to have their lands recognized and protected. The government's open support for those who want to violate indigenous territorial rights is extremely shameful."

Local activists are likewise calling out the government's budget cuts. "These deaths of our isolated relatives are the result of the weakening of FUNAI in the Vale do Javari Indigenous Territory, home to the highest registered number of isolated Indians in the world," Paulo Marubo, president of the União dos Povos Indígenas do Vale do Javari told the local news agency Amazônia Real. "The budget and resource cuts make the territory more vulnerable and increase threats."

The Temer administration has not responded to these public criticisms, but on Sep. 11 the Ministry of Justice extended the mandate for the national police, the Força Nacional de Segurança Pública, to maintain a presence in Pará state for at least another 120 days in order to remove non-indigenous people from the Apyterewa Indigenous Territory. The construction of the controversial Belo Monte hydroelectric dam ([NotiSur, April 30, 2010](#), and [May 28, 2010](#); [NotiEn, July 29, 2011](#)) brought a number of workers to the area from other parts of Brazil who illegally occupied land in the indigenous reserve.

Past killings

Analysts believe that last month's killings may be the worst massacre in recent Brazilian history of a previously uncontacted or recently contacted tribe. In 1993, illegal miners invaded an indigenous reserve near the Haximu village and killed 16 members of the Yanomami tribe while looking for gold. At the time, FUNAI's delays in confirming the number of deaths prompted international condemnation.

In a separate incident in May, also in the Vale do Javari, some 18 to 21 members of the isolated Warikama Djapar were allegedly killed under orders from a rancher or farmer. On Aug. 29, the Amazonas state prosecutor's office referred the matter to the federal police, who have not yet made any determinations about the case.

Also in late August, FUNAI coordinated a raid along with federal environmental and law enforcement officials to combat illegal mining in the area. Four excavators were seized and a fine of R\$1 million (US\$320,000) was issued to six miners for environmental crimes.

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