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Preventing Brazilian Indigenous Genocide and Protecting the Amazon

It is official. On the first of the year, Jair Bolsonaro, was inaugurated as the 38th President of Brazil. One of his first official acts as a newly inaugurated president was doing away with demarcation of indigenous territories in Brazil. All of us living on this planet should be fearful of this act.

Bolsonaro transferred the responsibility of demarcation of indigenous lands to the Brazilian Ministry of Agriculture and placed the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI, Fundação Nacional do Índio) under its jurisdiction. It is FUNAI's responsibility to protect the nation's Indians and yet the Ministry of Agriculture is traditionally known to protect the interests of big business, especially soy farmers and cattle ranchers. Both are powerful lobbying groups in Brazil and likewise partly responsible for destroying the Amazon and its people. In effect, FUNAI is no more under the Bolsonaro administration.

We should also realize this is not only a fulfilled campaign promise of Bolsonaro but a realized fear for the legitimation of genocide against Brazilian indigenous peoples and also the imminent destruction of the Brazilian Amazon. It is also important to note that 60 percent of the Amazon is under Brazilian jurisdiction.

At the end of November, a United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity was held in Egypt. It was there many of the world's Amazonian indigenous leaders proposed a 200-million-hectare corridor stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Andes mountains along the great meandering Amazon River and its tributaries in order to protect the world's largest rainforest and its incredibly varied fauna and flora. Such an ecological plan would

not only protect the forest and its wildlife but its many indigenous peoples and their lands. What is more, such a scheme may have the long-term benefit of preventing climate change and global warming from becoming inevitable realities.

To understand the immensity of such a proposed biodiversity corridor, think of an area the size of Mexico and 500 different Amazonian indigenous nations with their wide array of cultures living within it. Ponder for a moment that 10 million species of animals, insects, and plants exist within the Amazon rainforest. Almost 80 percent of the world's biodiversity is to be found on indigenous lands and Native territories are some of the most biodiverse on earth.

Now more than ever we should be taking such environmental propositions very seriously for the fate of humankind.

The proposal to protect the Amazon with a “sacred corridor of life and culture” was presented by COICA (Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon River Basin, Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica) at the UN conference.

Yet, Brazilian President Bolsonaro and newly elected Colombian President, Iván Duque Márquez, along with other powerful business leaders, most likely will not consider such a plan because of economic interests for developing the Amazon for energy (e.g. hydro-electric dam projects and oil prospecting), mining (e.g. excavating gold), resource exploitation (e.g. timber extraction) and agri-businesses (e.g. cattle ranching and soy farming). The UN biodiversity agreement is scheduled to be signed in Beijing, China in 2020.

President Bolsonaro has infamously likened indigenous peoples residing on protected territories in Brazil to “animals in zoos” (como animais em zoo). When humans dehumanize other humans, and equate them with non-human animals, we know psychologically such rhetoric allows for genocide. This was evident from the Rwanda genocide when Hutu heard racist radio messages about Tutsi equating them to cockroaches, among other things. Such directed racism allowed for the near Tutsi extermination, ranging between 500,000 to 1,000,000 killings in 1994. Similarly, Hitler's propagandists relentlessly compared Jews to rats. We know those results.

In a recent 2018 report commissioned by the ‘Climate and Land Use Alliance (CLU), Impacts on Extractive Industry and Infrastructure on Forests: Amazonia, it stated the following: “...large-scale infrastructure development, in particular road building and hydropower, have induced human settlement, forest clearance and an aggressive

expansion of the agricultural frontier across substantial parts of Amazonia. The synergies between agriculture and infrastructure are important, particularly in the Legal Amazon. The scale of future changes in forest cover will depend on where and how infrastructure investments move forward.”

There are presently about 850,000 Natives in Brazil. Bolsonaro believes they should be forcibly assimilated and integrated into Brazilian society along with Afro-slave descendants or Quilombolas living in the hinterland.

Three prominent Brazilian indigenous leaders, Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, Sônia Bone Guajajara, and Raoni Metuktire, have written a letter to the world to express their alarm.

Their peoples live in different areas of the Brazilian Amazon. The Yanomami people have been mostly isolated, living in Brazil and Venezuela, numbering some 35,000 people.

Since the 1980s, Yanomami have been subject to massacres from Brazilian gold miners (garimpeiros) who have also brought disease and mass death.

The Guajajara people live in the state of Maranhão and number some 19,000 people. During the 1960s through 1980s, there have been concerted efforts to develop and illegally settle on their lands.

The Kayapó live in the states of Mato Grosso and Pará and number some 9,000 people. Since the late 1980s, they have been fighting hydroelectric dam projects on their lands. The ongoing Belo Monte Dam will flood vast areas of Kayapó territories and have a very lasting negative impact upon the survival of these people by limiting fishing and massively destroying both fauna and flora.

Davi Kopenawa, Sônia Guajajara, and Raoni Metuktire stated in their letter:

“A genocide is unfolding in our country, Brazil. Our government is destroying us, indigenous peoples, our country’s first people. In the name of profit and power, our land is being stolen, our forests burned, our rivers polluted and our communities devastated. Our uncontacted relatives, who live deep in the forest, are being attacked and killed...This is the most aggressive attack we have experienced in our lifetimes. But we won’t be silenced. We do not want the riches of our land to be stolen and sold. For as long as we can remember, we have looked after our lands. We protect our forest as it gives us life...Please tell our government that our land is not for stealing.”

We should heed their warning and not allow the Brazilian government to sanction such a genocide against Brazilian Indians and simply remain silent. It is time to speak up.

Not only are nearly one million Brazilian indigenous lives at stake, but the Amazon rainforest as a world natural resource, is in certain jeopardy without protective measures.

The “sacred corridor” plan proposed by COICA at the 2018 UN Biodiversity Conference is a good beginning to ensure two million square kilometers of rainforest land along the Amazon River and its vast tributaries be preserved and safeguarded for future generations. Let’s begin the New Year by helping and protecting these people and the Amazon before it is too late.

How you can help:

One organization which has ongoing campaigns to protect Brazilian Amerindians is Survival

International: <https://www.survivalinternational.org/tribes/brazilian> <https://www.survivalinternational.org/news/12060>

You may wish to donate them or get involved in their ongoing campaigns to protect Brazilian Indians: <https://www.survivalinternational.org/donate> Or consider writing your US Senator or US Congressman or even your local Brazilian Consulate or Brazilian Embassy in Washington, D.C.: <http://www.brazil-help.com/brazil-emb-consul.htm>

Or sign a petition at Amazon Watch and pledge your support to protect the Amazonian Indians: <https://amazonwatch.org/take-action/pledge-solidarity-with-brazils-resistance>