

# Revealed: Brazil goldminers carve illegal ‘Road to Chaos’ out of Amazon reserve



The ‘Road to Chaos’ runs through the Yanomami territory in the Amazon. Photograph: Valentina Ricardo / Greenpeace

## **Aerial photos from reconnaissance mission reveal effort to smuggle excavators into Brazil’s largest Indigenous territory**

**Tom Phillips** *over the Yanomami Indigenous territory*

Mon 12 Dec 2022 07.00 GMT

The surveillance plane eased off the runway and banked west towards the frontline of one of Brazil’s most dramatic environmental and humanitarian crises.

Its objective: a clandestine 120km (75-mile) road that illegal mining mafias have carved out of the jungles of Brazil’s largest Indigenous territory in recent months, in an audacious attempt to smuggle excavators into those supposedly protected lands.

“I call it the Road to Chaos,” said Danicley de Aguiar,

the **Greenpeace** environmentalist leading the reconnaissance mission over the immense Indigenous sanctuary near the Brazilian border with Venezuela.

## **Illegal goldminers in the Amazon have carved a road through Brazil's biggest indigenous reserve**



📷 Activists believe thousands of excavators are operating within a huge Indigenous sanctuary in northern Brazil.

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Aguiar said such heavy machinery had never before been detected in the Yanomami territory – a Portugal-sized sweep of mountains, rivers and forests in the extreme north of Brazil's Amazon.

“We believe there are at least four excavators in there – and that takes mining in Yanomami territory to the next level, to a colossal level of destruction,” the senior forest campaigner said, as his team prepared to take to the skies to confirm the road's existence.

The plane's cabin filled with excited chatter an hour into the flight, as the first glimpses of the clandestine artery came into view.



Picture from a reconnaissance mission over an immense Indigenous sanctuary near the Brazilian border with Venezuela. Photograph: Valentina Ricardo / Greenpeace

“We found it, people!” the navigator celebrated, while the pilot performed a series of stomach-churning manoeuvres over the canopy to get a clearer view of the dirt track.

“That’s the Road to Chaos,” Aguiar announced through the plane’s internal communication system.

“And *this* is the chaos,” he added, pointing to a gaping hole in the rainforest where three yellow excavators had clawed a goldmine out of the banks of the coffee-coloured Catrimani River.

In a nearby clearing, a fourth digger could be seen wrecking a territory home to about 27,000 members of the Yanomami and Ye’kwana peoples, including several communities that do not have contact with the outside world.

Worryingly, one of those isolated villages is just 10 miles away from the illegal road, Aguiar said.

Sônia Guajajara, a prominent Indigenous leader who was also on the plane, suspected the criminals had benefited from Brazil’s recent presidential election to sneak their equipment deep into Yanomami lands. “Everyone was focused on other things, and they took advantage,” Guajajara said.

The arrival of excavators – witnessed for the first time by journalists from the Guardian and Brazilian broadcaster TV Globo – is the latest chapter in a half-century assault by powerful and politically connected mining gangs.



Miners are devastating Yanomami territory in the Amazon. Photograph: Valentina Ricardo / Greenpeace

Wildcat prospectors known as *garimpeiros* began flocking to Yanomami land in search of tin ore and gold in the 1970s and 80s, after the military dictatorship urged poor Brazilians to occupy a region it called “a land without men for men without land”.

Huge fortunes were made – and often lost. But for the Yanomami it was a catastrophe. Lives and traditions were upended. Villages were decimated by influenza and measles epidemics. About 20% of the tribe died in just seven years, **according** to the rights group Survival International.

A global outcry saw tens of thousands of miners evicted in the early 1990s as part of a security operation called *Selva Livre* (Jungle Liberation). Under international pressure, Brazil’s then president, Fernando Collor de Mello, created a 9.6m-hectare reserve. “We have to guarantee the Yanomami a space so they don’t lose their cultural identity or their habitat,” Mello **said**.



## 'Like a bomb going off': why Brazil's largest reserve is facing destruction

Those efforts initially succeeded but by the next decade the *garimpeiros* were back due to soaring gold prices, lax enforcement and grinding poverty that ensured mining bosses a constant supply of exploitable workers.

The assault intensified after Jair Bolsonaro – a far-right populist who wants Indigenous lands opened to commercial development – was elected president in 2018, with the number of wildcat miners on Yanomami land reaching an estimated 25,000.

“It was a government of blood,” said Júnior Hekurari Yanomami, a Yanomami leader who blamed Bolsonaro for emboldening the invaders with his anti-Indigenous rhetoric and for crippling Brazil’s environmental and Indigenous protection agencies.

When Guardian journalist Dom Phillips, who was murdered in the Amazon last June, visited a mine in the Yanomami territory in late 2019, he found **“a hand-operated industrial hell amid the wild tropical beauty”**: mud-caked miners using wooden scaffolding and high-pressure hoses to blast their way through the earth.

“It’s astonishing. You’re in the lap of this great forest and it’s almost as if you’re in one those old films about ancient Egypt ... All those monstrous machines destroying the earth to make money,” said the photographer João Laet who travelled there with the British reporter.

Three years later, the situation has deteriorated further with the arrival of hydraulic excavators and the illegal road.



Illegal goldmining picked up under Brazil’s outgoing far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro. Photograph: Valentina Ricardo / Greenpeace

Alisson Marugal, a federal prosecutor tasked with protecting Yanomami lands, said the introduction of such machinery was a troubling development for communities already facing an acute “humanitarian tragedy”.

Miners, some with suspected ties to drug factions, had brought sexual violence, malaria outbreaks and forced health posts to close, exposing children to “scandalous” levels of disease and **malnutrition**. Rivers were being poisoned with mercury by an illegal fleet of about 150 mining vessels.

Marugal said Brazil’s underfunded environmental agency Ibama launched sporadic crackdowns, blowing up and torching illegal airstrips, helicopters and planes used to reach the territory. But the intermittence of such missions – and

the huge economic rewards involved – meant they were only a temporary inconvenience.



### 'We have the worst record in the world': the deadly business of Brazil's bush pilots

Bush pilots could receive up to 1,000,000 reais (£160,000) for a few, perilous months ferrying prospectors, supplies and sex workers to remote jungle camps. For their bosses, the profits were greater still.

Brazil's incoming president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, **has pledged to put the *garimpeiros* out of business** and slash deforestation, which has soared under Bolsonaro.

“Both Brazil and the planet need the Amazon alive,” Lula said in his first speech after narrowly defeating his rival in October's election.

Marugal believed stopping illegal mining on Yanomami land was perfectly possible if there was political will, which was something entirely lacking under Bolsonaro. In fact, Ibama already had a plan involving a relentless, six-month offensive that would have cut off the miners' supply lines and force them to flee the forest by starving them of fuel and food.

Aguiar argued a militarized crackdown would not succeed in the long term unless it was accompanied by policies attacking the hardship on which environmental crime was built.

“This isn’t going to be fixed just with rifles,” said the campaigner. “Overcoming poverty is an essential part of overcoming this economy of destruction.”

Hekurari Yanomami also hopes for a large-scale federal intervention when the new government takes power in January, but warns that defeating the *garimpeiros* will not be easy.

“These miners don’t just carry spades and axes ... They have rifles and submachine guns ... They are armed and all of [their] bases have heavily armed security guards with the same kind of weapons that the army, the federal police and the military police use,” he said.

The price of inaction would be obliteration for a people who have inhabited the rainforest for thousands of years.

“If nothing is done we’ll lose this Indigenous land,” Marugal said. “For the Yanomami, the outlook is grim.”

**Brazil aerial photos  
show miners’  
devastation of  
indigenous people’s  
land**



Impact of thousands of wildcat goldminers shown as president Jair Bolsonaro is accused of trying to promote their illegal work

by **Tom Phillips** and **Flávia Milhorange** in Rio de Janeiro

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**R**are and disturbing aerial photographs have laid bare the devastation being inflicted on Brazil's largest reserve for indigenous people by thousands of wildcat goldminers whose illegal activities have accelerated under the country's far-right leader, **Jair Bolsonaro**.

Activists believe **as many as 20,000 *garimpeiro* prospectors are operating within the Yanomami reserve** in northern Brazil using speedboats and light aircraft to penetrate the vast expanse of jungle near the border with Venezuela.

Bolsonaro, who has repeatedly bemoaned the size of the Yanomami territory and been accused of emboldening environmental criminals with his pro-development rhetoric, was due to make a provocative trip to a village in the reserve's south-western tip on Thursday – his first to an indigenous community since becoming president in January 2019. Yanomami leaders **denounced the visit** as an unwanted attempt to promote illegal mining in their ancestral land.

The images, captured during flyovers early last month, leave no doubt about the intruders' impact on the 9.6m-hectare (24m-acre) Amazon enclave – nor the impunity with which they are allowed to act in a supposedly protected reserve.



An illegal gold mine in the Uraricoera river region of the Yanomami reserve. Photograph: Christian Braga/Greenpeace

Several photographs show areas where the miners, whose trade **Bolsonaro has vowed to legalise**, have obliterated the dense, pine-green forest and replaced it with immense bronze-coloured gashes littered with felled trees and pools of stagnant water. Others depict bustling riverside encampments where the *garimpeiros* live and work, featuring bars, restaurants, shops, houses and even a snooker table. In some pictures it is possible to make out single-engine planes and helicopters – used to smuggle workers, supplies and equipment into

the reserve – positioned beside clandestine airstrips near the Venezuelan border.

Along the Uraricoera river, **a region the Guardian visited last year**, the monitoring team spotted enormous manmade craters reminiscent of the Serra Pelada goldmine made notorious in the 1980s by the images of Brazil’s most celebrated photographer, **Sebastião Salgado**.

“What shocked me was the enormity of it,” said Christian Braga, the Amazon-based photographer who took the recent images from a Greenpeace turboprop plane.

“We knew these mines existed. The whole of **Brazil** knows there are goldmines on Yanomami land. But we didn’t understand the true scale of it and how economically valuable these mines are. These mines are prosperous. These mines are worth millions ... It is truly frightening. They are just huge.”



An area of rainforest destroyed by goldminers in the Apiaú region of the Yanomami reserve. Photograph: Christian Braga/Greenpeace

Braga said the miners he saw at work in the Yanomami reserve, which is the same size as Portugal, bore no relation to those who once used steel pans to hunt for gold in remote Amazon rivers.

“That’s history; nowadays the mines are insane. These guys are organised. They’ve got planes. They got antennas. They’ve got satellite TV, motorbikes, quad bikes, planes, helicopters, air conditioning, generators. These guys have built a town,” the photographer said.

“When I looked down [at their camps] I just thought: we’ve lost control of goldmining ... just look at the point this has reached. More than 20,000 *garimpeiros*. What are we going to do now?”



'Like a bomb going off': why Brazil's largest reserve is facing destruction

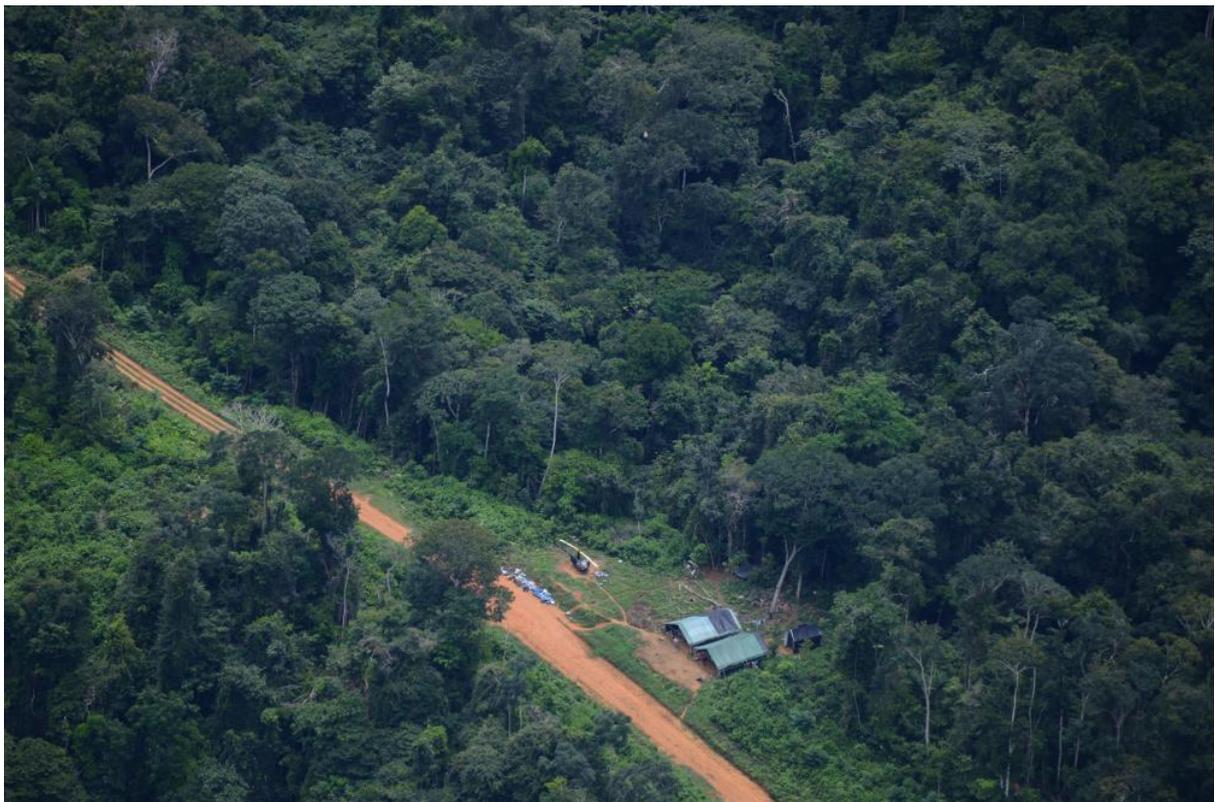
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Braga’s photos were released as part of [a report](#) from the Yanomami association Hutukara exposing the dramatic expansion of mining in their territory. The report, which also used satellite imagery, claimed last year there was a 30% increase in deforestation within the reserve compared with 2019, with about 500 hectares of forest razed – the equivalent of about 500 football pitches. Another 200 hectares were destroyed in the first three months of this year.

Estêvão Senra, one of the report’s authors, said an “environmental and human tragedy” was under way in the reserve where an estimated 27,000 Yanomami live, largely isolated from the rest of Brazil.

“The destruction caused by illegal mining this year could break last year’s record, which was already very dramatic,” said Senra, a geographer who is tracking the miners’ advance through Yanomami territory. “Business is booming and this is extremely worrying.”

Indigenous activists describe the crisis as the territory’s most troubling moment since the late 1980s and 1990s when tens of thousands of wildcat miners poured into the reserve bringing with them violence and diseases to which many Yanomami lacked immunity. In the most infamous episode, in 1993, goldminers murdered 16 Yanomami in what became known as the Haximu massacre. “It was terrible,” Carlo Zacquini, an Italian missionary who has worked with the Yanomami since the 1960s, **told the New York Times** in the aftermath of those killings. “One of the miners stabbed a child, then cut his head off.”



Single-engine planes and helicopters - used to smuggle workers, supplies and equipment into the reserve - were photographed beside clandestine airstrips near the Venezuelan border.

Photographs by Christian Braga/Greenpeace

Dário Kopenawa Yanomami, an indigenous leader who was born during that catastrophic gold rush, said he feared history was repeating itself. “I grew up amid the invasion of 40,000 wildcat miners, who killed almost 20% of my people ... we suffered so much. Our relatives were massacred.

The *garimpeiros* killed a lot,” the 37-year-old said, adding: “It feels like we’re facing the same crisis today.”

The sense of emergency has intensified in recent weeks **after deadly clashes** between miners and Yanomami and a gun battle between federal police agents and heavily armed gunmen apparently linked to the mines. “There are signs the situation may become even more complicated [than in the 1980s],” Senra said.

In a recent interview the anthropologist Ana Maria Machado, who works with the Yanomami, called the region “a pressure cooker about to explode” and claimed Brazil’s president shouldered part of the blame because he had encouraged the invading miners. “Bolsonaro gives a green light to all types of illegality in the reserves,” Machado said.