'Genocide' fears for isolated tribes as ex-missionary named to head Brazil agency

Jair Bolsonaro’s ‘dangerous’ appointment of Ricardo Lopes Dias threatens remote indigenous people, UN special rapporteur says

Dom Phillips in Rio de Janeiro

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Brazil has put a former evangelical missionary in charge of its isolated indigenous tribes, provoking concern among indigenous groups, NGOs, anthropologists and even government officials, who fear the government of the far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, is overseeing a new push to spread Christianity among Brazil’s indigenous people.

The appointment of Ricardo Lopes Dias, an anthropologist and evangelical pastor, to head the department for isolated and recently contacted tribes at the indigenous agency Funai, was announced on Wednesday.
Dias will have detailed information on 107 isolated tribes, including monitoring and location studies. Brazil has more “voluntarily isolated” tribes – some of whom are believed to have hidden from white society after massacres and epidemics – than any other country.

Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, the UN special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous people, said: “This is a dangerous decision that may have the potential to cause genocide among isolated indigenous people.”

Bolsonaro has frequently made racist remarks about the country’s indigenous people, recently commenting that they were “increasingly becoming human beings just like us”.

Critics say he is bargaining indigenous lives for political support from the powerful evangelical lobby, just as his attacks on environmental agencies have appeased wildcat miners and farmers in the Amazon.

“There are those who see nothing but the greed of land-grabbers, cattle ranchers and mining companies driving Bolsonaro’s anti-indigenous policies. But it’s clear cultural annihilation with religious dividends is also guiding the presidency,” the Folha de S Paulo newspaper said on Tuesday.

Critics said Dias’s appointment threatened the survival of vulnerable isolated groups, which in the past have been decimated by diseases like measles and flu after coming into contact with evangelical missionaries, government employees and outsiders.

The Brazilian Amazon indigenous organisation Coiab warned of “the crimes of genocide and ethnocide that will be committed against our isolated relatives”.

Beto Marubo, an indigenous leader from the Javari Valley reserve, said evangelical missionaries destroy the “cosmological and ethical” belief systems of indigenous people. “The behaviour of missionaries in indigenous communities is as malign as a disease,” he said.

Between 1997 and 2007, Dias worked as a missionary in the same reserve for the controversial group New Tribes Mission, who pledged to convert every last “unreached people group” on earth. The group has since changed its name to Ethnos 360.

“I’ve been in these tribes and at times you can feel this incredible, intense darkness. But you know what I found? No darkness is too dark for God,” CEO
Larry Brown says in a video on its website.

In his 2015 dissertation for a social science master’s degree, Dias said he decided as a young man to commit himself to the “cause” of evangelizing among indigenous people.

Speaking to O Globo newspaper last week, he refused to say whether he would change Brazil’s 37-year rule of “no contact” with indigenous people.

“My performance will be technical. I will not promote evangelisation of indigenous people,” he said.

But Brazil’s public defender’s office said such a nomination risked “the mass death of indigenous people from illness resulting from irresponsible contact, or conflicts between religious missions, loggers, wildcat miners, hunters and illegal fishermen”.


Indigenous experts said the move to allow evangelical missionaries to contact remote tribes has already begun. They allege a missionary group is using a mental health visit to gain access to a remote Amazon tribe they were previously expelled from.

Following an alert from a local Funai official, the federal prosecutor for
Amazonas state has written to the head of the government’s indigenous health service (Sesai) demanding details of the mission to visit the remote Suruwaha tribe.

According to the alert, the visit will be led by Sesai’s boss, Silvia Waiãpi – an indigenous woman, army officer and former soap opera actor who campaigned for Bolsonaro.

It also includes two Suruwaha indigenous women who live in an evangelical community in Brasília run by Jocum – the Brazilian arm of international evangelical missionary group Youth With A Mission.

Four psychologists and a Jocum linguist are also in the group.

Federal prosecutors ordered Funai to expel Jocum missionaries from the Suruwaha reserve in 2003.

The latest mission was launched after five Suruwaha killed themselves last year. About 150 people live in the community, where ritual suicides have long been part of the culture. One Swiss study counted up to 12 suicides a year between 1984 and 2018.

Adriana Huber, an anthropologist with the Indigenous Missionary Council – a Catholic NGO – lived with the Suruwaha from 2006 to 2011. She said suicides are part of the cosmology of the tribe, used as a form of conflict resolution, and have happened since the 1930s. Any move by the Brazilian state to treat mental health issues should be negotiated with the tribe, she said, not imposed upon them.

Brazil's Bolsonaro unveils bill to allow commercial mining on indigenous land

Move by far-right president was a campaign promise
Bolsonaro expects ‘pressure from environmentalists’
‘Genocide’ fears for isolated tribes as ex-missionary named to head Brazil agency

Reuters in Brasília
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Brazil’s far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, unveiled a controversial bill on Wednesday that would allow commercial mining on protected indigenous lands, delivering on a campaign promise that has shocked tribal leaders and environmentalists.

The bill to regulate mining including oil and gas projects, as well as hydroelectric dams, on indigenous reservations for the first time, will be sent to congress this week. Brazil’s constitution currently does not rule out mining on reservations, but does not allow it because it has not been regulated.

“This is a big step forward, but it will face pressure from environmentalists,” Bolsonaro said in a speech.

Bolsonaro has long alleged that Brazil’s indigenous people occupy too much land – 13% of the country – and hinder economic development of untold mineral resources, from gold and diamonds to niobium and rare earths.

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

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But leaders of most of Brazil’s 300 tribes oppose mining on their reservations.
and say that allowing commercial mining would undermine their communities and wipe out their cultures, which are already threatened by increasing invasions by illegal loggers and wildcat miners.

Environmentalists who see the indigenous communities as the best guardians of Brazil’s tropical forests warn that mining will speed up deforestation.

The proposal includes provisions to consult indigenous communities and would require congressional approval for any mining or hydroelectric power generation project. Government officials have said, however, that indigenous communities would not have the right to veto projects once authorized by congress.

Bolsonaro also separately plans to allow large-scale commercial agriculture on indigenous reservations, which is not permitted under current environmental laws.

'Like a bomb going off': why Brazil's largest
Gold prospectors are ravaging the Yanomami indigenous reserve. So why does President Bolsonaro want to make them legal?

by Dom Phillips, Yanomami indigenous reserve, Brazil

Deep in the Yanomami indigenous reserve on the northern reaches of the Brazilian Amazon, the ruins of an illegal goldminers’ camp emerge after an hour in a small plane and two in a boat. No roads reach here.

Wooden frames alongside the Uraricoera River that once supported shops, bars, restaurants, a pharmacy, an evangelical church and even brothels are all that is left of the small town. The army burned and trashed it as part of an operation aimed at stamping out wildcat mining on the reserve.

The army may have taken away the town, but they left the garimpeiros, as the miners are called, who this morning are hunched around a freezer, waiting for the soldiers camped downriver to leave so they can get back to work. Up to 20,000 garimpeiros are estimated by Brazilian NGO Instituto Socioambiental to have invaded this reserve, where mining and unauthorised outsiders are...
currently prohibited. But the *garimpeiros* may not remain unauthorised for long: the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, has promised to legalise their work with a bill in Congress.

“I know it is illegal,” says Bernardo Gomes, 59, sitting by the frame of a bar. Formerly a worker at mining giant Vale, Gomes says his time at the company taught him how to protect the environment. “Today, unfortunately, I am helping to destroy it,” he says, explaining that a nearby patch of dead trees was suffocated by mud sucked out of the nearby mining pit.
Some of his companions decline to talk, including a young woman who arrives carrying a bottle of whiskey and a speaker playing pop music. “Want a photo? Naked?” she jokes.

In eight days reporting from different locations in the Yanomami reserve, the Guardian saw numerous mining pits and barges. Camps and bases had been destroyed along the Uraricoera – but its banks still teemed with outsiders.

With 9.6m hectares (23.7m acres) of wild forest – an area bigger than Portugal – Yanomami is Brazil’s largest reserve. A fifth of its indigenous population died from diseases after 40,000 garimpeiros flooded the reserve in the 1980s, according to Survival International. The miners were expelled and the area declared a reserve in 1992 following a campaign by Survival, photographer Claudia Andujar and Davi Kopenawa, director of the Hutukara Yanomami Association, which invited the Guardian to visit the reserve.

But the current garimpeiro invasion worsened after Bolsonaro took office. The president has said the reserve is too big for its population of around 26,000
indigenous people, and its mineral riches should be exploited. His ministers have met garimpo leaders.

But garimpeiros bring malaria, prostitution and violence, indigenous leaders argue, while scientists say the mercury the miners use to separate gold particles from mud and silt enters rivers and the food chain. Their pits and barges upset ecosystems, scare away wildlife, and fill rivers with mud that distorts fish behaviour and breeding.

[Image: An army checkpoint on the Uraricoera River. Photograph: João Laet/The Guardian]

Indigenous people used to call this upriver region Paixão de Mutum – or Curassow’s Passion – after the large, pheasant-like bird they hunted here. Now it is known as Tatuzão – Big Armadillo – for the pits that miners have gouged out of the forest. Miners have replaced the mutum.

“Somebody should help us. The government doesn’t care, it wants to finish indigenous people off,” says Geraldo Magalhães, 42, a Ye’kwana indigenous man and deputy chief of Waikás village, a two-hour boat-ride away. In November leaders of the majority Yanomami and much smaller Ye’kwana tribes sent a letter to Bolsonaro. “We do not want garimpo and mining on our land,” it said. “Garimpo out!”

Funai, the national agency which works to protect indigenous lands, plans to reopen three bases in the reserve. But repeated army operations have failed to
shift the miners.

Just a few minutes upriver from the ruined camp, work has already resumed in an enormous mining pit, where tarpaulin and scaffolding made of logs and twine hold up a bank of earth. Three men toil waist-deep in mud with a hose jetting water under an uprooted tree. Mud pours down a rough wooden sluice, while black smoke belches from a deafening diesel engine: a hand-operated industrial hell amid the wild tropical beauty.

“We are here to get gold. These are our riches,” says garimpeiro Fredson Pedrosa, 40. “Everyone here is counting on the army leaving so they can work again.”

The men are from small towns in Brazil’s impoverished north and north-east, where they say minimum-salary wages of around US$250 a month (£194) are barely enough to live on. “You do this to keep your family,” says Denilson Nascimento, 33.

Garimpeiros say they voted for Bolsonaro after he promised to legalise their trade. “We know it damages the environment,” says Antonio Almeida, 24, who runs a bar here. “But there is a lot of nature, no way you can kill it all.”
Wildcat mining is deeply entwined with local life in Waikás. Four villagers work as boatmen for the miners, others sell food at Tatução and two run a smaller mining site nearby. Tolls on the *garimpo* boats paid for generators, boat motors and televisions.

“The *garimpo* is a reality and they’re used to it,” says Edmilson Estevão, 33, who was raised in the village and works for the Ye’kwana association Wanasseduume. Some villagers work with the mining, others reject it, but the Ye’kwana keep their differences to themselves. “Same family, same blood,” he says.
Júlio Ye’kwana, president of Wanaseduume, says that mining has had a heavy impact on hunting and fishing.

Photograph: João Laet/The Guardian

The *garimpo* has impacted heavily on hunting, fishing and water quality. “The prey is getting further and further away. Fish are disappearing, and are contaminated with mercury,” says Júlio Ye’kwana, 39, Wanaseduume’s president. “Wild pigs used to live around the village. Not anymore.”

When mining in the Tatuzão area was operating at full pelt, the river where children bathe and families collect water thickened with mud. “The water was very dirty,” says Nivaldo Edamya, 34, the village chief. “What *garimpo* does is bad. Deforestation, various diseases, that’s why I am against them.”

Academic research on the impacts of *garimpo* – or Artisanal and Small Scale Gold Mining (ASGM) – on biodiversity backs up these complaints.
Marcelo Oliveira, a conservation specialist at the World Wildlife Fund has found high mercury levels in fish as far as 150km from ASGM sites in the Amazon. He and other researchers found mercury in Amazon river dolphins – nearly half of those studied had dangerously high levels – and other researchers found record mercury levels in jaguar fur near ASGM sites in the Brazilian Pantanal. “This is an invisible problem,” he says.

Birds and larger mammals are sensitive to changes in forest cover and vegetation and flee garimpo areas, says David Lutz, a US-based research assistant professor in environmental studies at Dartmouth College who has studied ASGM in the Peruvian Amazon for a decade. “Massive disturbance. This is like a bomb going off. This is as drastic as you’ll see,” he says, after viewing photos of Tatução.
A study carried out by Lutz and colleagues in Peru found water quality was severely impacted near ASGM sites. Mud and silt thickened rivers, reducing visibility, which would disturb seasonal behaviour and even the breeding habits of fish and the life cycles of insects. “There is a handful of species that can handle this change, so those species become dominant and it lowers the numbers of other species,” says Lutz.

Near Waikás, two rough-hewn wooden barges used to dredge for gold are hidden in a tributary. Banks of sand, stones and mud sucked up by the barges had formed in the river. “They are reshaping the river structure,” says Lutz. “This will really change the sediment.”

In the 1980s and 1990s, William Milliken, an ethnobotanist at Kew Gardens documented the impacts in Yanomami areas degraded by ASGM, such as disappearing caiman and a reduction in plants such as fish poison vine. “It’s likely to happen again,” he said.
The mercury that miners use to separate gold particles from mud and silt is dumped into rivers and burned off into the air, says Luis Fernandez, a tropical ecologist and director at the Wake Forest University centre for Amazon Scientific Innovation in the US.

Mercury spreads into the aquatic ecosystem via a process called biomagnification and concentrates rapidly as it passes up the food chain.

“The food chain acts like a signal amplifier,” he says. “Environmental chemistry in the tropics is much faster than in temperate regions.”
A recent study found that 92% of indigenous people in a village near Waikás had higher than safe levels of mercury in their hair. Photograph: João Laet/The Guardian

A study published in 2018 found that 92% of indigenous people in a village near Waikás, where a garimpo site operated, had higher than safe levels of mercury in their hair. In Waikás, the level was 28%. “Here, all the garimpeiros use it [mercury],” says one miner.
An hour’s flight across the rolling hills of jungle from Waikás – passing over a garimpo pit and camp with its own vegetable garden – brings you to the health post at Maloca Paapiú. The Yanomami people it serves live in communal houses of extended families deep in thick forest, reached by muddy, winding trails. Here, men and women use black and red face and body paint and women wear short skirts of fronds, bamboo spears in their noses and cheeks; barefoot children skip nimbly across the slippery logs that serve as bridges across numerous streams and rivers.

Garimpeiros overran the region in the late 1980s. Now they are inching closer again.

Noemia Yanomama, 40, says she saw a garimpo camp near the hills where she hunts. She worries young indigenous men will bring sexual diseases from prostitutes in the camps. “Soon they will get close to the community. That makes me very sad,” she says.

Young men and teenage boys gather daily at the health post to charge cellphones they bought working on garimpo sites reached by hours of walking. One site abandoned this year was just a few hours away.

This is creating a generational divide with their parents, who still hunt with bows and arrows. “The garimpo is not our friend. We call it a disease,” says Tibiana Yanomama, 42.

His son Oziel, 15, escaped to the nearest garimpo with his friend Marcos, 21. Both spent three weeks working there, clearing jungle, before Tibiana went and dragged them back.

“I wanted shoes, a machete, a sharpening file,” Marcos says. “I wanted a hammock. I wanted to work.” He was paid five grams of gold (worth around $180). He saw garimpeiros working with mercury and drank beer and sugar cane rum. “I got very drunk,” he says, with a nervous laugh.
Tibiana is furious with Oziel. “The youth don’t listen,” he says. And he is livid with Bolsonaro’s plans to legalise garimpo. “What does he want for Brazil? This forest is Brazil,” he says. Oziel caught malaria, a recurrent problem in garimpo camps, where pools of waste water provide breeding grounds for mosquitos. The Maloca Paapiú health post handles 15 new cases a week.

For the Yanomami, nature and spirituality are intrinsically linked: every rock, every waterfall, every bird, every monkey has a spirit, says Maneose Yanomama, 55, shaman of the Sikamabi-U community. And the spirits of nature are sounding the alarm. “The whites are getting closer. They are damaging our land, they are destroying our rivers, they are ruining our forests,” he said. “Nature is very scared.”

"He wants to destroy us'": Bolsonaro poses gravest threat in decades, Amazon tribes say

Indigenous leaders who say Brazil’s new president is trying to force them from their lands are braced for a new era of ruin
Indigenous leaders gathered in Atalaia do Norte to discuss how best to defend their lands against the anticipated onslaught. Photograph: Ana Palacios/CIDSE & REPAM

As a blood-orange sunset drifted towards the forest canopy, Raimundo Kanamari sat on the riverbank and pondered the future of his tribe under Brazil’s far-right president.

“Bolsonaro’s no good,” he said. “He wants to destroy the lot of us, bomb our villages. That’s the news I heard.”

For all Jair Bolsonaro’s well-documented hostility to indigenous rights, an aerial assault on the Amazon seems far-fetched. But campaigners believe that under Brazil’s new administration indigenous communities face their most severe threat since military rulers bulldozed highways through the region nearly five decades ago, leaving behind a trail of death and environmental destruction.

“Not since the dictatorship have we lived through such a tough moment,” said Jaime Siqueira, the head of the Indigenous Work Centre (CTI), a Brazilian NGO
supporting indigenous communities fighting to defend their lands.

Ewerton Marubo, a leader from the Javari Valley indigenous territory – an almost Portugal-sized hinterland sheltering Brazil’s largest concentration of uncontacted tribes – said its 6,000 inhabitants were bracing for a new era of ruin.

“We are in a situation of great danger. [Bolsonaro] is proving himself to be the number-one enemy of the indigenous,” he said.

On a steamy July evening, Ewerton was one of two dozen regional leaders gathered in Atalaia do Norte – the riverside portal to the Javari reserve – to discuss ways to defend it from the anticipated onslaught.

Two days later caciques (chieftains) from the eight contacted tribes living in the region were due to hold an emergency summit at a village further west on the border with Peru.

Like other indigenous territories in the Amazon, the Javari Valley – created in 1998 in an effort to protect its dwellers and their homes – has long suffered incursions from intruders seeking to cash in on its abundant natural resources.

But as Bolsonaro ratchets up his anti-indigenous rhetoric and continues to
dismantle Funai – the already chronically underfunded agency supposed to protect Brazil’s 300-odd tribes – Javari leaders fear a dramatic deterioration.

“The current government’s dream is to exterminate the indigenous people so they can take our land,” claimed Kevin Mayoruna, 39, a leader from Javari’s Matsés tribe who recently staged a protest in his village on the Jaquirana River.

Marcos Mayoruna, another Matsés leader, alleged that by deliberately failing to stop invaders entering the Javari reserve, and simultaneously depriving indigenous communities of healthcare and education, Bolsonaro’s administration was trying to force them from lands that could then be commercially developed.

“All he thinks about is money. All he thinks about is deforestation,” Mayoruna complained, warning of the implications for the global climate if Javari’s forests were lost.

“The forest isn’t just for us indigenous,” he said. “It’s for everyone.”

The Javari Valley is far from the only indigenous territory threatened under Bolsonaro, who has compared their inhabitants to animals in zoos and vowed not to demarcate “one square centimeter” of land for such groups.

Thousands of wildcat miners – apparently emboldened by Bolsonaro’s repeated proclamations that indigenous territories were too big – have reportedly been pouring on to Yanomami lands near Brazil’s border with Venezuela in search of gold.

Further south in Rondônia state, members of the Uru-eu-wau-wau tribe have been battling since January to keep armed land-grabbers off their 1.9m hectare reserve.
But the stakes are particularly high in the Javari Valley, a balloon-shaped sweep of rainforests and rivers thought to house 16 “lost tribes” living in voluntary isolation. For such groups – who can lack immunity to simple illnesses such as influenza – contact with outsiders can be fatal.

Cristina Larraín, an Atalaia-based activist for the Indigenous Missionary Council (Cimi), said Javari’s tribes were facing an intensifying assault from loggers, cattle ranchers, hunters, fishermen and wildcat goldminers, as well as oil companies over the border in Peru.

Crippling budget cuts to Funai meant the agency had just 18 employees to stop intruders entering the 8.5m hectare enclave, and four other reserves further south.

The agency – whose new Bolsonarian chief has horrified specialists – is so starved of resources that staff must buy anti-venom out of their own pockets before making perilous weeks-long missions into the Javari’s snake-infested jungles.

“It is an area the size of a country that is almost completely unprotected,” Larraín said. “I feel overwhelmed.”

Siqueira claimed Bolsonaro’s “aggressive and condescending” rhetoric towards
Brazil’s indigenous peoples had already given their “historic enemies” the green light to accelerate their illegal advance into territories such as the Javari.

“It’s not just deforestation that has gone up in the Amazon [under Bolsonaro]. Violence against indigenous groups has, too,” he said.

During a meeting with foreign journalists last week, Bolsonaro defended his desire to develop indigenous reserves, warned the international community against meddling in the Amazon, and painted himself as a champion of indigenous people who no longer wanted to live “like prehistoric men with no access to technology, science, information, and the wonders of modernity”.

But as they gathered at the headquarters of their indigenous association, Javari activists and elders said they were determined to resist what they called a Bolsonaro-backed assault on their ancestral homes.

“He sees us as animals. As if we didn’t know how to think,” said Ewerton Marubo, who hoped foreign funding might help tribes adopt surveillance techniques to safeguard their land. “But we are much more intelligent than he is.”

Matis elders gather in the Amazon town of Atalaia do Norte. Photograph: Tom Phillips
Lucia Kanamari, one of the Javari’s few female leaders, said: “If the government doesn’t support us, we must find a way of protecting ourselves. He [Bolsonaro] has come to leave us in the darkness, but we won’t allow it.”

Ewerton said he felt a particular duty to defend the isolados, the tribes living in seclusion deep in the reserve, who could not speak for themselves.

“Just imagine if all this is destroyed, if the government opens this area up. In two years it will all be gone,” he predicted. “The wood will be gone. The fish will be gone. The rivers will all be polluted. All they want is to destroy.”

As the sun rose over Atalaia do Norte and indigenous emissaries prepared to cast off for their rainforest conclave, the leaders convened for a final assembly about protecting their homes.

Ivan Chunu Matis, a Matis elder wearing a Macaw feather headdress and ear and nose rings fashioned from snail shells, grew agitated as he considered the threat posed by the man he calls “Bolsonario”.

“He’s a bad man. It’s as if he understands nothing,” he remonstrated. “He doesn’t want to help the poor or the suffering. He just wants to help the rich so he can get the resources they desire.”

As she readied herself for the trip, Lucia Kanamari said Javari’s people were now fighting for their lives.

“He’s not a president who has come to fix things. He’s a president who has come to destroy,” she said. “It’s a tragedy for us.”

Brazil's Amazon: Deforestation high in January despite rainy season

8 hours ago
Deforestation in Brazil's Amazon rainforest doubled in January compared with a year ago, reaching a five-year record for the month, officials say. Destruction at this time of the year tends to slow down as the rainy season makes access to areas more difficult. But instead of falling to the same low levels as in the past, deforestation remained high, official data showed. Critics say far-right President Jair Bolsonaro's policies and rhetoric encourage illegal activities. Deforestation in the Amazon - a vital carbon store that slows down the pace of global warming - soared last year, the first of President Bolsonaro in office. His environmental policies have been widely condemned, but he has rejected the criticism, saying Brazil remains an example for conservation.

More than 280 sq km (108 square miles) were cleared in January, an increase of 108% on January of last year, according to the space research agency Inpe - a record for the month since data started being collected in 2016. One square kilometre roughly equals 200 football pitches.
Climatologist Carlos Nobre, a scientist and researcher at São Paulo University (USP), said there was a risk that deforestation this year could surpass the level recorded in 2019. At the peak of the dry season last year - between July and September - destruction was above 1,000 sq km per month.

"It's very worrying the increase in January 2020. It suggests that the factors that caused the increase in deforestation in 2019 are still very active. It's time for an effective and comprehensive action to control and contain illegalities in the Amazon," he told G1 website (in Portuguese).

Mr Bolsonaro has previously criticised the environmental enforcement agency, Ibama, for what he described as excessive fines, and his first year in office saw a sharp drop in financial penalties being imposed for environmental violations. At the same time, the agency remains underfunded and understaffed.

One unnamed field operative for Ibama told Reuters news agency: "We see a huge difference [in deforestation]... We thought there would be a drop off because of the weather and all that, but it didn't happen."

Ibama and Brazil's environment ministry have not commented.
Meanwhile, on Wednesday, Mr Bolsonaro unveiled his project to open up protected indigenous reserves in the Amazon to activities including commercial mining and farming, a controversial plan that still needs to be approved by Congress. Critics and environmental groups say Mr Bolsonaro's plans could further increase deforestation in the Amazon. Mr Bolsonaro, who has repeatedly criticised the size of indigenous reserves, says the economic development of those areas will benefit indigenous groups.

On Twitter, Joenia Wapichana, Brazil's sole indigenous congresswoman, said: "Mining on indigenous lands is illegal and unconstitutional... Mining only brings pollution and death. We don't want the deaths of rivers, the forest and indigenous peoples."

Mr Bolsonaro has also vowed to integrate indigenous people into the rest of the population, saying they live in poverty like "animals in zoos". Last month, he was criticised after saying indigenous people were "evolving" and becoming more human. Also on Wednesday, Mr Bolsonaro named Ricardo Lopes Dias, a former missionary who worked with a group committed to opening churches on indigenous land, to head the office in charge of isolated tribes at the indigenous affairs agency, Funai. The appointment was widely criticised by rights groups and Funai workers, amid fears it could signal a change to the government's traditional hands-off approach to the remote groups.

Related Topics
BRASILIA (Reuters) - Federal prosecutors sought on Tuesday to reverse a controversial decision by Brazil’s right-wing government to appoint a former evangelical missionary to protect isolated and recently contacted indigenous tribes in the Amazon.

The prosecutors cited a conflict of interest in the appointment of Ricardo Lopes Dias as head of the department in charge of protecting indigenous tribes from contact with non-indigenous people because he
was linked to a missionary group, the New Tribes, whose aim was to convert “unreached people” to Christianity.

They asked a Brasilia court to suspend the appointment because it raises the risk of “genocide and ethnocide” among Brazil’s 107 non-contacted or barely contacted indigenous groups living in the Amazon rainforest, the lawsuit said.

Dias, a theologian and anthropologist, was from 1997 to 2007 a member of the New Tribes, a group founded in the United States in 1942 and now called Ethnos360, whose mission is to evangelize indigenous peoples by bringing the Bible to them in their own languages.

He was formally appointed last week to head the most sensitive department of the government’s indigenous affairs agency Funai, which under far-right President Jair
Bolsonaro has defended the interests of farmers and ranchers in land conflicts with indigenous groups.

Bolsonaro has also unveiled a bill to allow mining on protected reservations, a move most indigenous leaders oppose as a threat to the survival of their communities that are facing increasing invasions by illegal loggers and miners.

After taking office last year, the president picked a police officer to run Funai, Marcelo Xavier, a farm lobby appointee who has replaced most of the agency’s experienced coordinators.

Funai said the prosecutors were being “intransigent” in rejecting Dias because he is an evangelical Christian and added in a statement that the government’s solicitor
general would defend his appointment.

Dias told Reuters by WhatsApp he was being “persecuted.”

Anthropologists, indigenous rights activists and other church groups have condemned his appointment, fearing it marked a departure from Funai’s policy adopted in 1987 of not seeking out isolated indigenous groups, shielding them from diseases they have no defense against and allowing them to decide if they wanted contact with Brazilian society or not.

“Putting an evangelical missionary in charge of the uncontacted Indians department of Funai is like putting a fox in charge of the hen house,” Survival International said last week, warning that forced contact would destroy isolated
The group that advocates for tribal people’s rights called the appointment, along with Bolsonaro’s proposal for mining on reservations, “a genocidal plan for the total destruction of the most vulnerable peoples on the planet.”