



Environmental special forces raid an illegal cassiterite mine near the Yanomami village of Xitei.

Photograph: Tom Phillips/The Guardian

‘A war society doesn’t see’: the Brazilian force driving out mining gangs from Indigenous lands

An elite unit is on a mission to expel the illegal miners who devastated Yanomami territory during Bolsonaro’s presidency

by **Tom Phillips** in the Yanomami Indigenous territory

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or the last four years Brazil's rainforests bled. "They bled like never before," said Felipe Finger as he prepared to venture into the jungle with his assault rifle to staunch the environmental carnage inflicted on the Amazon under the former far-right president **Jair Bolsonaro**.

Moments later Finger, a mettlesome special forces commander for Brazil's environmental protection agency, Ibama, was airborne in a single-engine helicopter, hurtling over the forest canopy towards the frontline of a ferocious war on nature and the **Indigenous peoples** who lived here long before Portuguese explorers arrived more than 500 years ago.



Felipe Finger, a special forces commander for Brazil's environmental protection agency, Ibama, leads his troops on a mission to destroy illegal mines into the Yanomami Indigenous territory. Photograph: The Guardian



Felipe Finger torches a motor used by illegal goldminers. Photograph: Tom Phillips/The Guardian

The group's objective was Xitei, one of the most isolated corners of the Yanomami Indigenous territory on Brazil's northern border with Venezuela. Tens of thousands of illegal miners devastated the region during Bolsonaro's environmentally calamitous 2019-2023 presidency, hijacking Indigenous villages, banishing health workers, poisoning rivers with mercury, and prompting what his leftist successor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, has called **a premeditated genocide**.



Guardian graphic

As Finger's aircraft swooped down into a muddy clearing beside a Yanomami village, a handful of those miners scurried into the forest in their wellies in an attempt to avoid capture.

The motors fuelling their clandestine cassiterite mining operation were still growling as members of his six-strong unit leapt from their helicopters and fanned out across an apocalyptic landscape of sodden craters and fallen trees.

“Illegal mining on Yanomami land is finished,” declared Finger, a camouflage-clad forest engineer turned rainforest warrior whose team has been spearheading **efforts to evict** the prospectors since early February.



Environmental special forces burn down a mining camp in the Yanomami Indigenous territory. Photograph: Tom Phillips/The Guardian

The raid in Xitei was part of what has been hailed by the government as a historic drive to expel miners from Yanomami lands and rescue the Amazon after **four years of chaos, criminality and bloodshed** such as that which saw the British journalist Dom Phillips and the Indigenous specialist Bruno Pereira murdered last June.

The Guardian was one of the first media organisations granted access to those efforts, traveling deep into Yanomami territory to accompany Finger's elite squad, the Special Inspection Group (GEF).

The group's agents gathered early last Friday at a camp on the Uraricoera River – one of the main arteries miners use to invade the territory, which is the size of Portugal and where about 30,000 Yanomami live in more than 300 villages.

Twenty-four hours earlier a gang of illegal miners – who the government has ordered to leave the territory by 6 April – had exchanged fire with troops who

blockaded the waterway in order to cut off their supplies. One miner was shot in the face.

Shortly before 11am the agents took to the skies in two Squirrel helicopters and powered south-west towards Xitei where they had spotted a series of mines during a surveillance flight the previous day.

“This region has been absolutely devastated ... there are villages that are now completely surrounded by the mines,” said Finger, 43.



Aerial view of mines in the Yanomami territory. Photograph: Tom Phillips/The Guardian

Thirty minutes later his first target came into view. The helicopters corkscrewed down from a cloud-filled sky into a tawny gash in the forest where miners had been pillaging gold from protected Yanomami lands.

The miners had fled, abandoning their equipment in a muddy pit where a small brook once flowed. “They left in a hurry – just a few days ago,” Finger said as his crew trudged through their deserted encampment.

Clothes, empty packets of cigarettes and painkillers and spent 12-gauge shotgun cartridges littered the ground near a wooden sluice used to separate gold from gravel and dirt.



Finger's troops raid an illegal goldmine in the Yanomami Indigenous territory. Photograph: Tom Phillips/The Guardian

After setting fire to the sluice and the motors that powered hoses used to blast away soil, Finger's group reboarded their helicopters and raced towards their second target: a larger cluster of mines near the Venezuelan border.

When the Guardian **last visited the Xitei region** in 2007, it was a sea of largely pristine rainforest dotted with traditional communal huts and deactivated clandestine airstrips that were dynamited during the last major operation to evict miners, in the early 1990s.

Fifteen years later the jungle around Xitei has been shattered. Immense sand-coloured lacerations have replaced dark green woodlands. Ramshackle mining campsites stand where tapirs and deers once roamed. Unknown quantities of mercury have polluted rivers, poisoning the fish on which the Yanomami rely.



Yanomami villagers carry away the supplies from an illegal mining camp raided by environmental troops near the village of Xitei. Photograph: Tom Phillips/The Guardian

Dário Kopenawa, a prominent Yanomami leader, compared the environmental desecration to leishmaniasis, a disease carried by sand flies that causes horrific skin lesions and ulcers.

“Our land is so sick. Our rivers are sick. The forest’s sick ... the air we breathe is sick,” he said, using a Yanomami word to describe the catastrophe that unfolded under Bolsonaro, whose anti-environmental rhetoric and crippling of protection agencies such as Ibama caused deforestation to soar.

“I would call it *onokãe*,” Kopenawa said. “It means a genocide which kills people, spills blood and ends lives.”

As the Ibama team landed in the cassiterite quarry, its operators scattered. Dozens of Yanomami villagers emerged from the jungle, curious about the arrival of Finger’s flying squad.

The women wore traditional red loincloths and had yellow and white beads draped over their bare chests. The men wore jaguar teeth necklaces and clutched arrows adorned with the black feathers of pheasant-like curassow birds. The children sported flip-flops and football shirts, given as gifts by the miners.



Yanomami villagers watch Finger's troops arrive. Photograph: The Guardian

The men shook their heads when asked to name Brazil's current and former presidents. But the consequences of Bolsonaro's incitement of environmental crime were visible all around: the wrecked forest, the bulging sacks of illegally extracted minerals, and the filthy encampment where beer cans and tins of sardines were strewn on the ground.



Yanomami villagers watch environmental troops land in an illegal mine near their community. Photograph: Tom Phillips/The Guardian

Nearby, Finger's team chased down one fugitive miner, a former butcher named Edmilson Dias from the mid-western state of Goiás.

Dias, a weather-beaten 39-year-old whose eight years toiling in the mines had given him the appearance of a far older man, voted for Lula in last October's crunch election. But the miner lambasted the new president's crackdown and insisted it would fail.

"Mining's a fever," the dejected miner said as he sat on a tree trunk flanked by Finger's heavily armed troops. "If you kick me out of this mine ... I'll just go somewhere else because illegal mining will never end."

Similar defiance could be heard around the swimming pool of the best hotel in Boa Vista, the city nearest to the Yanomami enclave. On a recent afternoon one portly mining boss sat there, swigging beer and bragging how his team had buried its gear in the jungle to prevent troops destroying it. Miners had doused the earth over the concealed objects with petrol to help them relocate their equipment by stopping the forest from growing back.



Environmental agents frisk suspected miners at a blockade along the Uraricoera River. Photograph: Tom Phillips/The Guardian

The boss predicted Lula's clampdown would fade after six months, allowing miners to resume their multimillion dollar activities in more than 200 pits. But Lula allies are adamant they have come to the Yanomami territory to stay.

"This is Lula's pledge and we're all working ... so this pledge becomes reality. We are determined to make this work," said the environment minister, Marina Silva, vowing to defend other Indigenous territories ravaged by illegal mining such as those of the Munduruku and Kayapó peoples.



A Yanomami man sits beside an illegal cassiterite mining operation deep in the Indigenous territory. Photograph: Tom Phillips/The Guardian

For the Yanomami such pledges are a matter of life and death. At least 570 Yanomami children reportedly died of curable diseases during Bolsonaro's administration, partly because rampant mining gangs had caused an explosion of malaria and made it impossible for health workers to operate.

"This is a crime. There's no other name for it – an attempted genocide," said Silva, denouncing the "ethically, politically, morally and spiritually degrading" conditions she believed the Yanomami had been deliberately subjected to under Bolsonaro.

André Siqueira, a malaria expert who visited the Yanomami territory recently to assess the health emergency, described horrifying scenes of malnourishment and neglect. "I saw five-year-old children who weighed less than my two-year-old. Even on trips to Africa I'd never seen such levels of malnutrition. I'd only seen it in books," he said.

Bruce Albert, an anthropologist who has worked with the Yanomami since the 70s, when miners first stormed their territory, accused Bolsonaro of seeking to “totally annihilate” the Yanomami by sabotaging efforts to shield the lands they are thought to have inhabited for thousands of years.

“Bolsonaro’s plan was a species of genocide by means of intentional negligence,” Albert said of the politician, who he believed was obsessed with military dictatorship-era conspiracy theories that hostile foreign powers wanted to annex the border region by inciting an Indigenous separatist movement. “And if Bolsonaro had had another four years [in power] his plan would have succeeded.”

Brazil’s former president has called such accusations a leftist “farce”. Dias also rejected claims miners were destroying the Yanomami.

“When our machines are all working they eat well and they live well,” he said reeling off the names of three supposed Yanomami collaborators. “Miners aren’t crooks and what they are doing to us is a total disgrace.”

Dias also denied miners were collecting gold with the use of mercury, which can cause birth defects, kidney damage and even death. Moments later, however, Finger emerged from Dias’s shack brandishing a plastic flask filled with the toxic heavy metal. “It’s not just dangerous, it’s lethal – for them [the miners] and for the Indigenous,” he bristled.



Ibama agent Rafael Sant'Ana dismantles a wooden sluice used to separate gold from dirt. Photograph: Tom Phillips/The Guardian

Dias confessed to paying about five grams of gold (£240) for the silvery substance. “It comes from X-ray machines, hospitals, that sort of thing,” he mumbled.

After Dias’s supplies were distributed to Yanomami villagers, his hovel was torched. He was fined and left in the forest to find his way home.

Finger’s troops soared back to base to clean their weapons and prepare for the next day’s mission at the vanguard of Lula’s campaign to write a new chapter for the environment, the Yanomami, and the global fight against climate change.

“We’re fighting a de facto war,” Finger said as Ibama agents frisked down a group of miners fleeing along the river behind him. “It’s a silent war that society doesn’t see – but those of us doing battle know it exists.”



A Yanomami child, who is being treated for malnutrition, sits with his father in Boa Vista, Roraima state, on January 27. Disease and malnutrition have torn through Yanomami villages over the last four years.

Amanda Perobelli/Reuters

The Yanomami people lived in harmony with nature. Invaders turned their lives into a fight for survival.

By Tara John and Rodrigo Pedroso, CNN

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New YorkCNN —

Shaman Davi Kopenawa Yanomami furrowed his brow as he stared out at the skyscrapers and buildings looming through the window of his oak-panelled hotel room in New York City. “I’m here, in the city of stone, and mirrors and glass... but in my heart, I’m in mourning,” he told CNN.

Davi has campaigned for Brazil’s Yanomami people, one of the largest relatively isolated indigenous groups in South America, for nearly 40 years – braving threats on his life for his activism. Last week, he was invited to Manhattan for the opening of a group exhibition of Yanomami artists and Brazilian photographer Claudia Andujar at cultural center The Shed, which counted among its guests United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres.

Despite the glamour of the surroundings, Davi's mind was more than 2,000 miles away, deep in the forests of Brazil, where a health crisis has gripped his people. "I'm in mourning...for my people, who I've lost," he said, referring to recent images that emerged from the territory showing emaciated Yanomami adults and children, some with swollen bellies from hunger.

Disease and malnutrition have torn through Yanomami villages over the last four years – a crisis that experts lay at the feet of the scores of illegal miners who have set up camp in their sprawling territory, spurred by the high price of gold.



Davi Kopenawa Yanomami is pictured in New York ahead of an exhibition opening in The Shed.

Tara John/CNN

Yanomami children are dying at a disproportionate rate from preventable diseases, like malaria and malnutrition. At least 570 Yanomami children have died from preventable causes since 2018, Brazil's health ministry told CNN.

Fiona Watson, research and advocacy director at indigenous human rights group Survival International, said high malaria rates – spread by miners – have left many Yanomami adults too unwell to hunt or fish, as they rely entirely off the forest and rivers for food. "That means the food's not coming in, hence you get so much malnutrition (that) has led to this terrible catastrophe," she said.

Their predicament is exacerbated by water pollution and environmental destruction from the mines, and sometimes violent encounters with the intruders. In January, Ariel Castro Alves, Lula's National Secretary for the Rights of Children and Adolescents, said a federal government delegation were told in January that at least 30 Yanomami girls and teenagers had been abused and impregnated by miners.

Government health workers, who might have mitigated the crisis, have been intimidated and even driven out of the area by miners who took over health facilities and airstrips, Junior Hekurari Yanomami, president of the Urihi Yanomami Association, told CNN.



A nurse talks to a Yanomami mother, whose son is treated for malnutrition in Boa Vista.

Amanda Perobelli/Reuters

The emergency is the latest test for Brazil's newly inaugurated President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who has made environmental protection a priority for his term in office. In January, he launched a crackdown on illegal mines in Yanomami territory, and the country's military, environmental agencies and police forces are currently sweeping through the area to clear it of miners.

Lula's administration has brought hope, says Davi, especially through his appointment of the country's first minister for indigenous people, Sonia Guajajara.

"But he's going to need a lot of support," the activist said of Brazil's bitterly polarized political landscape.

A gold rush emboldened by Bolsonaro

Yanomami territory, which spans the Brazilian states of Roraima and Amazonas, is supposed to be a protected reservation where mining is illegal. But miners have flooded the area over the last several years as gold prices boomed, stripping the natural environment and in some cases driving away vital health workers.

While it is hard to get an accurate number of mines in the sprawling territory, which equals the size of Portugal, a report by Brazilian NGO Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), based on satellite imaging, found that mines on Yanomami land had risen from four in 2015 to 1,556 by the end of 2021.



Speaking from Boa Vista in late January, Lula pledged to eliminate illegal mining, saying he was "shocked" by the Yanomami's poor health.

Ricardo Stuckert/Handout/Reuters

As hunter-agriculturalists, the Yanomami maintain a symbiotic relationship with their environment. Some 30,400 Yanomami live in the territory, and as they are largely isolated from the outside world, they are more vulnerable to common viruses. Exploitation and encroachment in the forest by extractive industries has proven to be fatal for the indigenous group and their traditional way of life.

The building of the Trans Amazonian highway, started in the 1970s by the Brazilian military dictatorship who were keen to develop the Amazon basin, introduced measles, malaria and the flu that decimated Yanomami communities, said Watson.

A goldrush in 1986 later saw an estimated 20% of the Yanomami community die in a seven-year period, according to Watson. Many of those miners were driven out in 1992, when the area was demarcated by the government of then-President Fernando Collor de Mello.



Food is airdropped from a military transport aircraft to the Surucucu military base on January 26, which will be delivered to the Yanomami.

Edmar Barros/AP

Davi says he noticed a shift when former President Jair Bolsonaro was in power. Miners felt emboldened to enter the territory armed “with a lot of heavy equipment, the mechanised dredgers, and they were using petrol, mercury, and then they... used planes and small landing strips and helicopters,” Davi said.

The arrival of new miners brought misery, said Davi, including reported threats and attacks against Yanomami communities. In May 2021, a half-hour shootout with miners left four dead, including two Yanomami children – a video of the incident showed women and children running for cover as a boat passed the riverbanks of their village.

“It’s his fault. He let the illness of mining in,” Davi says of Bolsonaro.



An illegal mining area is seen in Yanomami indigenous territory, Roraima state, Brazil, on February 3, 2023.

Amanda Perobelli/Reuters

Bolsonaro has called accusations that he turned a blind eye to the Yanomami plight a “left-wing farce” on his official Telegram channel on January 21. Having visited the region before, he shared pictures of him with indigenous people on his [Telegram](#) account as well as government press releases from his presidency, including one saying the World Health Organization praised the vaccination rate of Brazil’s indigenous people under his government in 2021.

During his term from 2019 to 2022, Bolsonaro signed an environmental protection decree to raise fines for illegal logging, fishing, burning, hunting, and deforestation. His [administration](#) also saw Brazil’s National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) – a government agency that oversees policies related to indigenous communities – invest \$16 million in surveillance of indigenous lands to combat illegal activities there.

However, the far-right leader also supported legislation to open indigenous protected areas to mining, reduced funding or dismantled agencies tasked with monitoring and enforcing environmental regulations, and repeatedly claimed that indigenous territories are “too big” – all of which emboldened trespassers, [experts say](#).



Lula says Brazil is no more divided than the US as he meets Biden

Brazil's Supreme Court has ordered an investigation to determine whether the actions of the Bolsonaro government amounted to “genocide” of the Yanomami. Ahead of Lula's meeting with President Joe Biden on Friday, he reiterated to CNN that Bolsonaro could be “punished” by courts for “the genocide against the Yanomami indigenous people.”

On January 30, Brazil's Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship (MDHC) also released a report on alleging that its previous administration disregarded numerous alerts made about the Yanomami's deteriorating situation.

CNN has reached out to Damares Alves, who led MDHC at the time. When asked about the claims by a Brazilian reporter on February 1, Alves responded: “The Yanomami have been living in a calamitous situation for decades. It's time for the people (the Senate) to change the union's budget so that we can take better care of the Yanomami Indians. As for the accusations, I will only speak when cited by a court”.

Brazil cracks down on illegal mining

There has been momentum since Lula's intervention in the territory. Speaking from Boa Vista in late January, Lula pledged to eliminate illegal mining, saying he was “shocked” by the Yanomami's poor health.

More than 1,000 unwell indigenous people have been evacuated from the Yanomami territory, and the Justice Ministry announced a major offensive against the miners, and closed the territory's airspace as it tackles their supply routes.

On Monday, Brazilian security forces began their enforcement operation to expel the miners, many of whom may have already left the area. Videos have emerged on social media of miners fleeing from the territory or imploring the government to help them leave the area. Last week, Justice Minister Flavio Dino said he expected 80% of the illegal miners to have left the first week of February.

A miner, who was seen leaving the area, told Reuters that the Yanomami were desperate for food parcels dropped by Air Force planes. “The day the parcels arrived, they were gone,” Joao Batista Costa, 65, told Reuters, while holding up a food parcel.



Illegal gold miners threaten fragile way of life, deep in Amazon rainforest

But resolving the crisis will be a long road, and Lula is likely to face resistance among parts of the sizeable number of Brazilians who support Bolsonaro's policies. Nor are all politicians on a regional level as enthused about indigenous protections; Roraima state governor Antonio Denarium, a Bolsonaro ally, for example, appeared to downplay the Yanomami crisis in an interview to Folha de S. Paulo newspaper in January, saying it was time for them to adapt to urban living and "leave the bush."

In a later statement to CNN, Denarium's office said the quotes were "taken out of context," adding that "the desire for people's lives to improve is the desire of anyone who values the dignity of indigenous or non-indigenous people."

For Davi, there has been little evidence that authorities valued Yanomami dignity in recent years.

"We indigenous peoples are badly treated, as are our rivers, the animals – but it's not just indigenous peoples who are dying, the city people are suffering as well," Davi said from his hotel room. "These two worlds really need to come together in a big embrace and not let our world be ruined."

Brazil launches operation to drive illegal miners from Yanomami lands

Special forces destroy aircraft and seize weapons in effort to protect largest Indigenous reserve from mining mafias



The special forces crackdown on illegal mining in Yanomami territory. Photograph: Ibama/Brazilian government

Tom Phillips in *Rio de Janeiro*

Wed 8 Feb 2023 17.09 GMT

The Brazilian government has launched its campaign to drive tens of thousands of illegal miners from the country's largest Indigenous reserve, with special-forces environmental operatives destroying aircraft and seizing weapons and boats during an operation deep in the Amazon's Yanomami territory.

Members of Brazil's environmental protection agency Ibama – with support from the Indigenous agency Funai and the newly created ministry for Indigenous peoples – launched the long-awaited operation on Monday, with troops establishing a base along the Uraricoera river. Wildcat tin ore and gold miners use the waterway – as well as dozens of illegal airstrips – to reach and supply their illegal outposts in Yanomami lands.



In a statement on Wednesday lunchtime, Brazil's government said the environmental squad had destroyed a helicopter, an airplane and a bulldozer used by mining mafias to drive clandestine roads through the region's jungles.

Footage of the raid showed the chassis of a helicopter smoldering near a patch of rainforest after it was torched by Ibama agents in order to prevent it being used again.

In December, the Guardian documented the existence of an illegal 75-mile "road to chaos" through Yanomami lands during a flyover with the Indigenous activist Sônia Guajajara, who weeks later was made Brazil's first ever minister for Indigenous peoples.

On Tuesday evening, Guajajara said the new government of leftist president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was determined to protect the nearly 30,000 Yanomami people living in Brazil from what authorities have called a “genocide”.

“The Yanomami want peace – that is all they want,” Guajajara told the television network GloboNews. “And this is what we are going to give them.”

Illegal goldminers known as *garimpeiros* began pouring on to Yanomami lands in the 1970s and 80s, after the 1964-85 military dictatorship urged impoverished Brazilians to populate a region they claimed foreign powers sought to seize.

A global outcry – which included Prince Charles condemning the “collective genocide” of the Yanomami – prompted government action. Tens of thousands of miners were removed from Yanomami lands in the early 1990s during a security operation called *Selva Livre* (Jungle Liberation). Brazil’s then president, Fernando Collor de Mello, created a supposedly protected 9.6m-hectare territory for the Yanomami which exists to this day.

However, the assault rekindled after the 2018 election of far-right president Jair Bolsonaro, who publicly railed against how such a large expanse of mineral-rich land had been set aside for the Indigenous group.

During Bolsonaro’s four-year administration – during which Amazon deforestation soared and the environmental and Indigenous agencies were enfeebled – at least 25,000 miners are estimated to have flocked in to the Yanomami territory near the border with Venezuela, bringing violence and disease.

“It was a government of blood,” the Yanomami leader, Júnior Hekurari, said in a recent interview.

Lula’s new government, which began on 1 January, has vowed to reserve Bolsonaro era policies that caused havoc for Brazil’s environment and Indigenous communities.

“We will put a complete end to any kind of illegal mining. This can’t be simply through a law – it must be almost a profession of faith,” the veteran leftist told the Guardian during last year’s election campaign.

On Wednesday afternoon, several top ministers, including the defense chief, José Múcio, touched down in the Amazon city of Boa Vista – the nearest to the Yanomami territory – to monitor the start of the crackdown.



An aerial view of Porto do Arame, on the banks of the Uraricoera river, the main access point for people trying to leave illegal mining sites. Photograph: Michael Dantas/AFP/Getty Images

This week’s operation follows outcry in Brazil over the humanitarian disaster that has struck the Yanomami territory in recent years as a result of the influx of miners and government inaction.

Dozens of Yanomami children have been **flown to hospitals in Boa Vista suffering from malnutrition and malaria** in recent days, with horrifying photographs of emaciated children and adults causing indignation in Brazil and internationally. At least 570 Yanomami children are reported to have died of curable diseases during Bolsonaro’s administration.

After a visit to the region last month, Lula said: “More than a humanitarian crisis, what I saw ... was a genocide. A premeditated crime against the

Yanomami, committed by a government impervious to the suffering of the Brazilian people.”

The crisis was **documented in the Guardian** by Dom Phillips, the British journalist whose murder in the Amazon last June shone a spotlight on the environmental degradation and crime that blighted the region during Brazil’s previous government.

“This is like a bomb going off. This is as drastic as you’ll see,” one environmental expert told Phillips after viewing images of one mine Phillips had visited in the Yanomami territory in late 2019.