

Brazil's battle to reclaim Yanomami lands from illegal miners turns deadly

Fatalities underline dangers in government efforts to evict thousands of miners who have devastated Indigenous territory

Tom Phillips in *Rio de Janeiro*

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- An illegal gold mine on Yanomami territory. Photograph: Tom Phillips/The Guardian
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Brazil's battle to **reclaim its largest Indigenous territory from tens of thousands of illegal miners** has taken a deadly turn after at least five people were reportedly killed during 36 hours of violence in the Amazon's sprawling Yanomami territory.

The bloodshed began on Saturday afternoon when masked illegal miners allegedly launched an attack on a Yanomami village called Uxiu.

The Yanomami leader, Júnior Hekurari, said he had received reports that between 15 and 20 heavily armed miners had arrived by boat and opened fire on locals. Three Yanomami men – aged 36, 31 and 24 – were shot. The oldest, an Indigenous health worker named as Ilson Xiriana, died early after being shot in the head.

“This barbarity will not go unanswered,” Brazil’s human rights minister, Silvio Almeida, [tweeted](#) as the government sent a high-level delegation of ministers and police chiefs to the region in response.

On Sunday, there was further violence in another part of the Portugal-sized Yanomami enclave in which at least four miners were killed as special forces members of the environmental protection group Ibama and the federal highway police (PRF) – the two groups leading the charge against illegal miners – raided an illegal cassiterite and gold field called “Garimpo do Ouro Mil”. Their arrival prompted a series of gun battles as gunmen – some wearing camouflage fatigues – challenged the government forces.

In a [statement](#), the PRF said its officers were attacked by heavily armed gunmen as their helicopters attempted to land. “Police returned fire and hit the four shooters, who succumbed to their injuries,” added the statement, which said police had recovered “an arsenal” including one assault rifle, three pistols, seven shotguns and two laser sights.

The environment ministry said there were suspicions the mine was run by a criminal organization, understood to be the First Capital Command (PCC) – a [São Paulo-born prison gang](#) that has become one of South America’s most powerful mafia groups.

The fatalities underline the challenges and dangers involved in government efforts to evict thousands of illegal miners who have devastated the Yanomami territory in recent years, causing what Brazil’s new president, [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#), has called “an attempted genocide” of the Indigenous group.

Those operations began in February, after Lula took office promising to confront the environmental criminals who activists accused his far-right predecessor, Jair Bolsonaro, of emboldening.

Hundreds of Yanomami children **reportedly died of curable diseases during Bolsonaro's government**, partly because mining gangs brought an explosion of malaria with them and made it impossible for health teams to work. Deforestation soared across the Amazon.



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

In a recent interview, the head of Lula's newly created federal police department for the environment and the Amazon, Humberto Freire, said he was "absolutely confident" the anti-mining crusade would succeed. "We estimate that there were 15 to 20,000 miners in the Yanomami lands ... [and] that more than 90% have now left," Freire said in late March.

According to Ibama, 327 mining camps, 18 planes and two helicopters have so far been destroyed, although its agents believe a considerable number of miners continue to operate on protected Yanomami lands, using an illegal fleet of helicopters to supply their mines – and smuggle out valuable minerals.

Freire said the complete closure of Yanomami airspace to such aircraft was not "just critical – it is essential". "Unless the airspace [over the territory] is completely closed and we see actions from the defense ministry which stop all

unauthorized aircraft flying over the Indigenous lands, the operation will not succeed,” the police chief warned.

On Monday, three members of Lula’s cabinet – the environment minister, Marina Silva, the **Indigenous peoples** minister, Sônia Guajajara, and the health minister, Nísia Trindade – travelled to Roraima state, where much of the Yanomami territory is located. Ibama’s president, Rodrigo Agostinho, also flew into the region, telling reporters Lula had given orders to speed up the expulsion of miners after Saturday’s attack.

“Things are tense,” said Hekurari, adding that the body of the Yanomami victim had been returned to the Indigenous territory so traditional rituals could take place.

In February, **the Guardian accompanied Ibama and PRF troops** as they raided a series of gold and cassiterite mines deep in Yanomami territory.

“We’re fighting a de facto war,” one of the operation’s commanders said after his team torched one jungle camp. “It’s a silent war that society doesn’t see – but those of us doing battle know it exists.”