

**Impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous Peoples in the Brazilian Amazon**

**Response to the Questionnaire of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, submitted by COIAB (the Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon) and the Indian Law Resource Center.**

**June 12, 2020**

**Responding institution/organization**

**The Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon, COIAB**, an indigenous organization founded on April 19, 1989 with the mission of defending the rights of indigenous peoples to land, health, education, and culture and the sustainability of indigenous peoples and organizations, considering their diversity, and aiming at their autonomy through organization and strengthening.  It is the largest indigenous organization in Brazil, and it covers the nine states of the Brazilian Amazon (Amazonas, Acre, Amapá, Maranhão, Mato Grosso, Pará, Rondônia, Roraima and Tocantins).  The organizations that make up COIAB are local associations, regional federations, women's organizations, as well as indigenous teachers and students.  The regional, state-based indigenous organizations that make up COIABare: the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Rondônia, Northwest of Mato Grosso and South of Amazonas - OPIROMA; Coordination of Organizations and Articulations of Indigenous Peoples of Maranhão - COAPIMA; Articulation of Indigenous Peoples and Organizations in Amapá and Northern Pará - APOIANP; Coordination of Organizations and Indigenous Peoples of Amazonas - COIPAM; Articulation of the Indigenous Peoples of Tocantins - ArPIT; Federation of Indigenous Peoples of Pará - FEPIPA; Federation of Indigenous Peoples and Organizations of Mato Grosso - FEPOIMT; and the Indigenous Council of Roraima - (CIR).  At the international level, COIAB is linked to the Coordination of Indigenous Organizations in the Amazon Basin - COICA, one of the largest indigenous organizations in the world, comprising indigenous peoples and organizations from the nine countries of the Amazon basin. COIAB is a private, non-profit organization.

**The Indian Law Resource Center** is an indigenous legal organization that provides legal assistance without charge to indigenous peoples of the Americas. The Center joins in this request in collaboration with the Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon. The Center has worked as a non-governmental organization at the international level in the United Nations and the Organization of American States since 1977. The Center has consultative status with ECOSOC.

**Name of contact persons**

Luiz Eloy Terena, Legal Advisor – COIAB, [adv.luizeloy@gmail.com](mailto:adv.luizeloy@gmail.com)

Leonardo Crippa, Senior Attorney, Indian Law Resource Center, [lcrippa@indianlaw.org](mailto:lcrippa@indianlaw.org).

**Specific issues and questions addressed**

COIAB provides this report and the attached press release and supplementary document, to respond to the call for inputs by the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples to inform his report to the General Assembly about the impact of COVID-19 on indigenous peoples.[[1]](#footnote-1) In specific, we respond to the following four topics identified in the call for inputs as potential issues to be addressed in the report:

* Incidence, mortality rates and increased risk of infection in indigenous communities
* Disparities and obstacles to adequate healthcare . . . and lack of culturally appropriate and accessible services
* Impact of national emergency measures on land security, land tenure and increased vulnerability to land grabbing and imposed development impacting indigenous peoples’ lands and waters during the COVID-19 pandemic
* Indigenous communities living in voluntary isolation.

In addressing these issues, we respond to the following specific questions posed in the call for inputs:

* How does the State collect and analyze information on the impact of COVID-19 on indigenous peoples and individuals? Is disaggregated data on indigenous peoples, including health impacts, available?
* Please provide information and specific examples showing the increased risks and/or disproportionate health impact of the pandemic on indigenous peoples. What measures have been taken to provide health care and other forms or urgent assistance for remote communities?
* Please provide information on how states of emergency may contribute to threats or aggravate ongoing human rights violations against indigenous peoples, including with regards to the freedom of assembly and the protection of their traditional lands and resources. What measures have been taken to protect the lands, territories and resources of indigenous peoples against invasions and land-grabbing by external actors during the pandemic?

**Incidence, mortality rates and increased risk of infection among indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon**

The situation of indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon region is alarming and rapidly growing worse.  Indigenous peoples and individuals in the Amazon are extremely vulnerable to COVID-19, and yet practically nothing has been done by government actors to create a strategy for preventive measures and health care for indigenous peoples and individuals.  The Brazilian government has so far not implemented standard recommendations for health measures to respond to the pandemic, even as the public health situation continues to deteriorate. Already Brazil has the second-highest number of COVID-19 deaths in the world, 45,24 as of June 17, and some 923,189 cases.[[2]](#footnote-2) And yet, after three months of confirmed Covid-19 cases in Brazil, the federal government's response to the crisis in the Amazon is still slow, uncoordinated and uncertain. To date, FUNAI, the government indigenous affairs ministry, does not have a national action plan to combat COVID-19, although the indigenous health agency, SESAI, has developed and published a National Contingency Plan for Infection of the New Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Indigenous Peoples. This lack of coordination and consistency greatly hampers the efficacy of the government response.

In the past few months, we have been following the pandemic in indigenous communities with grave concern. According to data collected by the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) and COIAB, as of June 14, 2020, 281 indigenous individuals in Brazil had died from COVID-19 and 5,361 had been confirmed to have contracted the disease.[[3]](#footnote-3) Those affected come from some 103 different indigenous peoples. The official data of the Special Secretariat for Indigenous Health lists only 2,894 cases and 97 deaths, because the Secretariat does not include urban indigenous people in its data. On June 6, 2020, official data showed that of the 20 cities in Brazil with the highest incidence of COVID-19 per 100,000 inhabitants, 19 are in the Amazon region; and of the 20 cities with the highest mortality per 100,000 inhabitants, 16 are also in the Amazon region. Many of these Amazonian cities have large indigenous populations.

Based on data from earlier in the month, the states with the highest number of deaths are Amazonas (129), Pará (35), Roraima (15), Pernambuco (10) and Ceará (8). Further, APIB’s data indicates that the fatality rate among indigenous peoples is 9.6%, while that of the general Brazilian population is 5.6%. In the past three weeks, over six indigenous people died per day, while the rate of indigenous COVID-19 cases rose by nearly 400 percent. As high as these numbers are, the true figures are likely far higher.  Experts have criticized Brazil’s COVID-19 statistics as deficient and in some cases manipulated.  On June 6th, the government’s decision to stop publishing Coronavirus deaths and infections triggered international outcry.  The Supreme Court has ordered the government to resume publishing running totals, declaring that withholding this information violates the state’s constitutional duty to protect “the life and health of all Brazilians.”

Indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon are at a substantially heightened risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19.  An April 2020 study by the Brazilian Association of Population Studies reports that the majority of indigenous territories in the Brazilian Amazon are “Critically Vulnerable” (the highest level of vulnerability) to the coronavirus.[[4]](#footnote-4)  Some 239 more indigenous territories in the Amazon are classified as having “Intense” or “High” vulnerability (the next highest categories).  Also in April 2020, the Center for Analytical Methods for Public Health Surveillance and the Working Group on Sociodemographic and Epidemiological Vulnerability of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil to the COVID-19 Pandemic released a joint report that confirms that indigenous peoples in Brazil are more vulnerable to COVID-19 than the non-indigenous population.[[5]](#footnote-5)  The report outlines how indigenous peoples, especially those in indigenous territories, experience serious geographic and epidemiological vulnerability.  These disadvantages include a lower level of formal schooling, less available health care and sanitation, and higher early mortality.

**Disparities and obstacles to adequate healthcare and lack of culturally appropriate and accessible services**

Indigenous peoples are also suffering from structural racism within Brazil's public health system.  This manifests in violations of indigenous peoples’ right to health (UNDRIP Art. 24).  In urban areas or outside their communities, indigenous people are not receiving culturally appropriate treatment that recognizes their status as an indigenous patient.  In fact, the Special Secretariat for Indigenous Health is refusing to serve indigenous people living in urban centers altogether. Given this dangerous policy decision it is unsurprising that there are few intensive care unit beds set aside for indigenous peoples in the cities—there is one ward in Manaus with 15 beds, and one in Macapá with five. In most of the small towns and cities in the Amazon and in indigenous territories, there are no ICU beds at all.

In indigenous territories, the pandemic has exposed the longstanding weaknesses and failings of Brazil’s health system and especially its indigenous health system. These failings include a lack of proper infrastructure; insufficient personal protective equipment; limited stock of medicines; high turnover of professionals; difficulties in ensuring adequate training of staff; integration problems with the larger health network; and the precarious and unsanitary situation of the government run indigenous health clinics. In remote areas in the Amazon, these problems are compounded and made much worse by additional difficulties, such as communication restrictions (some areas have communication only via radio); logistical difficulties resulting from geographical isolation (many areas have access only by river or air); in addition to the complexity of caring for indigenous populations in an intercultural context.

**Particular Risks to Indigenous Peoples Living in Voluntary Isolation**

Indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation are at great risk during this pandemic, and there are already confirmed cases in three indigenous territories where they are known to live, including Yanomami and Vale do Javari, which are home to several different groups. There are reported to be some 114 indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation in the Brazilian Amazon. Brazil's policy to protect indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation has two key elements. First, a prohibition on initiating contact with these peoples, and second, a policy to legally recognize their territories. Those groups whose existence has not yet been confirmed, and especially those reported to live outside of currently demarcated or protected areas, are therefore left largely unprotected by Brazil's policy. Without legal recognition, their territories are at the mercy of invaders and land grabbers that often commit acts of violence against them and whose presence increases the risk of the spread of new diseases, including COVID-19. Currently, however, even those who live in recognized indigenous territories are under threat, as invasions by illegal loggers, miners, hunters, and land grabbers are known to be currently underway in Yanomami, Araribóia, Vale do Javari, Munduruku, Ituna-Itatá, Pirititi, Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau, Apyterewa, Trincheira-Bacajá, Kayapó, Apiaká do Pontal and Isolados, Jacareúba / Katauixi.

In addition, certain Christian missionaries are illegally entering indigenous territories in an attempt to force contact on indigenous peoples.[[6]](#footnote-6) These invasions and trespasses put indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation or recent contact at risk of destruction, whether by the direct violence of the invaders or by epidemiological risks. This situation is further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic because indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation or recent contact are at especially high risk due to their lack of immunity, the absence of basic sanitation, and the very limited health care services available in the region.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**Land security, land tenure and increased vulnerability to land grabbing and imposed development during the COVID-19 pandemic**

COVID-19 is magnifying the threats to Brazil’s indigenous peoples and their territories already posed by the current administration.  The government has opened up vast tracts of the Amazon, including indigenous lands, to logging, mining, and ranching.  Since the election of Jair Bolsonaro, there has been an accelerated increase in deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon, particularly on indigenous lands. In 2019, deforestation in the Amazon rainforest rose 85% from 2018, according to Brazil’s space research agency INPE.  Much of the deforeseted area was indigenous land, with the ten most deforested indigenous territories being: Ituna / Itatá, Apyterewa, Cachoeira indigenous land, Trincheira Bacajá, Kayapó, Munduruku indigenous land; Karipuna, Uru-Eu-Wau-Wau, Manoki, and Yanomami. The New York Times reports[[8]](#footnote-8) that the climate of impunity for illegal logging and mining created by COVID-19 has put 2020 on track to surpass 2019’s record-breaking devastation in terms of deforestation and fires.  The head of the Amazon Task Force (Brazil’s federal enforcement body responsible for investigating environmental crimes) warns that “if state entities don’t adopt very decisive measures, we’re looking at a likely tragedy.”

In the face of these dangers, and due to the government’s inaction, indigenous peoples have taken steps to safeguard their health and their lands. In several territories indigenous peoples themselves have established isolation zones and sanitary quarantines, including by blocking roads and rivers that give access to communities, building quarantine posts, buying protective equipment and hygiene material, or simply dispersing in the forest. Indigenous organizations have also led grassroots advocacy efforts to demand the government direct priority attention to indigenous peoples given their vulnerability to COVID-19. Further, COIAB and APIB have developed an emergency plan to support indigenous communities’ response to the pandemic and have also used their existing network of grassroots indigenous organizations to collect accurate data, to monitor the progress of COVID-19 in indigenous territories, and to disseminate timely and accurate information about COVID-19 and its prevention.

**Conclusion**

We hope that this submission will help you start to understand the very dangerous situation indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon face. We are available to answer any questions you have or to provide you with any further information that might be helpful. Because this crisis is so grave and so urgent, we will continue to share additional information with you regularly so that you have the knowledge you need to help to protect the rights of indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon. We look forward to engaging directly with you and discussing what tools you can use to help us.

1. These documents are attached in their original Portuguese, along with working English translations for your convenience. The translations are human corrected versions of Google-translations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Johns Hopkins University of Medicine Coronavirus Resource Center, https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This data is still unpublished as of June 17, but was received directly from representatives of COIAB. The last published update from APIB, on June 6, recorded 236 deaths and 2,390 total cases, <http://quarentenaindigena.info/casos-indigenas/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Research carried out by: Marta Azevedo, Fernando Damasco, Marta Antunes, Marcos Henrique Martins e Matheus Pinto Rebouças, available at <https://apublica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/caderno-demografia-indigena.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Research carried out by: Aline Diniz Rodrigues Caldas, Ana Lúcia Pontes, Andrey M. Cardoso, Bárbara Cunha, and Ricardo Ventura Santos, available at <https://agencia.fiocruz.br/sites/agencia.fiocruz.br/files/u91/relatorios_tecnicos_-_covid-19_procc-emap-ensp-covid-19-report4_20200419-indigenas.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Daniel Biasetta, "*Missionário americano prepara invasão a terras indígenas com povos isolados na Amazônia, dizem liderancas*," O Globo, 24 March 2020,

   <https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/missionario-americano-prepara-invasao-terras-indigenas-com-povos-isolados-na-amazonia-dizem-liderancas-24325032>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Fábio Zuker, "*Médico sanitarista diz que doenças respiratórias, como coronavírus, são vilões do genocídio indígena*," Amazonia Real, 16 March 2020,

   <https://amazoniareal.com.br/medico-sanitarista-diz-que-doencas-respiratorias-como-coronavirus-sao-viloes-do-genocidio-indigena/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ernesto Lodoño, Manueal Andreoni and Letícia Casado, “*Amazon Deforestation Soarsas Pandemic Hobbles* Enforcement,” 6 June 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/06/world/americas/amazon-deforestation-brazil.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)