

Brazil aerial photos show miners' devastation of indigenous people's land



One of the illegal gold mines in the Uraricoera river region of the Yanomami reserve

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Rare 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.

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.

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?”

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 Zacchini, 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.”

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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.