

Jair Bolsonaro's tough talk places Brazil's Amazon rainforest in peril

Wildcat mining and violence have escalated since Brazilians elected a president who seems keen to encourage exploitation of the Amazon. Lucinda Elliott reports



Spoil heaps from a tin mine in Bom Futuro where 5,000 Brazilians work. Mining is a contributor to deforestation with two million

acres destroyed between August 2015 and July 2017

MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES

The Times, August 2 2019, 5:00pm

Share



Save



Dragged lifeless from the muddy river where it had been dumped, the tribal leader's body was covered in stab wounds, the blood from the fatal blows smearing into the red and black dyes used to adorn his body.

Tribe members say that Emyra Wajapi, 68, a local indigenous chief from the Brazilian Amazon, was murdered as he defended his village and the tribe's wider protected reservation in Amapa state from a takeover of illegal gold miners, known as *garimpeiros*, in the first such incursion against them in decades.

While organised crime has long been a fact of life in the world's largest rainforest, the violence last week against the Wajapi reflects an escalation in invasions by wildcat miners since the election last year of [Jair Bolsonaro](#), a populist president who has [denigrated indigenous people](#) and the rainforests they call home.

A Wajapi man in the Wajapi indigenous reserve in Amapa state. Emyra Wajapi, a tribal chief, was murdered there trying to protect land from exploitation

SEBASTIAN SMITH/APU GOMES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

“Ever since this government started campaigning they’ve threatened indigenous [people] and the forest. Now they’re putting those threats into practice,” said Hukai Waura, a member of the ancient Xingu Amazon tribe in Mato Grosso, the first to be granted protected status [in 1961].

Mr Bolsonaro, 64, has cultivated an atmosphere in which the Amazon has become a free-for-all, threatening not only indigenous people’s lives but also, campaigners say, the very survival of the Amazon, the most biodiverse place on Earth and its most crucial bulwark against climate change.

The president’s inflammatory comments that indigenous people want “electricity, television, blonde girlfriends and internet”, his threat to

withdraw from the Paris Climate agreement, and his extreme scepticism that tribal communities would choose to remain in protected areas of the rainforest, saying they are being kept in “zoos”, has dramatically shifted the Brazilian government’s rhetoric towards the Amazon region.

Mr Bolsonaro is a fierce critic of his country’s environmental regulations and law enforcement agencies, which he claims are biased against economic development — a key campaign promise. In April his environment minister, Ricardo Salles, fired 21 of 27 state heads of the environmental protection agency after the president ordered a clear-out. Only one has so far been replaced.

Gold miners clear a tree from a section of jungle forest. Thousands of Brazilians have headed into the Amazon in the past few years to exploit its fabulous natural wealth

VICTOR R CAIVANO/AP PHOTO

A fifth of the Amazon forest, an area the size of Britain and France combined, has been lost in the past 30 years. What remains is roughly the size of Western Europe.

The president has said the rainforest should now be exploited “in a reasonable way” — but critics say his promotion of mining and agribusiness, and his meddling with the institutions that protect the land, has helped fuel a surge in clashes and [encouraged landowners to cut down trees](#).

Brazil had been making progress in reducing the rate at which the Amazon rainforest is shrinking. At its peak in 1995, 29,059 sq km — an area approximately the size of Belgium — was being cut down every year. Last year that was reduced to about 7,900 sq km.

But satellite images released by Brazil's National Institute for Space Research last month suggested that deforestation in the Amazon during Bolsonaro's first seven months in office had accelerated. More than 1,260 sq km of trees had been lost in the first half of July alone, more than double the entire month of July last year (596 sq km), according to preliminary figures.

Mr Bolsonaro [has called the figures “a lie”](#) and threatened to fire the scientists who had released them. That threat appears to have been acted upon. Yesterday the science ministry said the head of the space agency, Ricardo Galvao, was to leave his position.

Mr Salles has also said the government would released alternative figures to dispute the

space agency's data, although he has not yet done so.

The opening up of roads and development of infrastructure projects has also set in motion a chain of land invasions and deforestation that quickly escape government control. Plans to re-open work on the Manaus-Porto Velho highway in Amazonas state, for instance, would open up half of what is left of Brazil's rainforest to farmers, loggers and others along the southern edge of the region.

Tracing the areas most at risk on a map, Antonio Oviedo from the Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), a non-profit organisation, described a number of factors at play. "What we are seeing is something that began in 2012," he said from his headquarters in Sao Paulo. "Government cuts began, so protection policies became more difficult to implement. Then a series of infrastructure projects inside the Amazon were approved and regulation shifted in favour of the small landowner."

The arrival of President Bolsonaro has only "solidified" the trend, Mr Oviedo said.

The new government also plans to allow

mining on protected indigenous reserves, an activity that was outlawed in 1998. Minerals like tantalum, used in phones, iron ore, bauxite and copper, make the Amazon region highly attractive to mining companies.

Dead trees in a recently deforested section of the Amazon, in Rondonia state. Deforestation rose by 29 per cent between 2015 and 2017
MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES

Mr Bolsonaro also promised this week to legalise the heavily polluting activities of *garimpeiros*, which devastate forests and poison rivers with mercury in their search for gold and other precious metals.

Popular support among Brazilians for the development of the Amazon remains unclear. In Congress and the courts, however, there has been a backlash. The president was this week prevented by the Supreme Court from transferring responsibility for indigenous lands from the Indian Protection Agency

(Funai) and the justice ministry to the ministry of agriculture.

For Waura of the Xingu community, the Bolsonaro government “only talks about mining” and is feeding a sense of lawlessness in the vast river basin. “They want to finish us off,” he said.

The death of the tribe leader in Amapa, currently under police investigation, and incursion into their land is the first of its kind reported against the Wajapi since the 1970s. The community attributes its resilience to having well demarcated lands, which were officially recognised by the government in 1996.

They are not the only tribe under threat. At least 14 fully protected indigenous territories are under attack from criminal groups, an investigation published by the NGO Reporter Brasil recently found. And any rollback of protections for indigenous lands, the NGO said, poses a direct threat to the rainforest they live in.

The environment minister, Mr Salles, has said that he wants to change the nature of the Amazon Fund, the largest international effort to conserve the Amazon, which is backed by Norway and Germany. As well as accusing NGOs of mishandling the money they are given, Mr Salles has said that money distributed from the \$1.28 billion fund should be used to compensate landowners for land that had been turned into conservation areas, even though most of it was occupied illegally in the first place.

The urgent task of rescuing Brazil's economy from the brink of yet another recession is one reason behind Mr Bolsonaro's stance. Thirteen million people are out of work in Brazil, and the president campaigned on a pledge to turn things around, and there are unimagined riches in the forests.

Appealing to international business groups this week as news of the Wajãpi land invasion broke, Mr Bolsonaro said: "I'm looking for the 'first world' to explore these areas in partnership and add value" — a reference to American and European investors.

Burning trees in an area of jungle hit by deforestation. Indigenous peoples accuse the Brazilian government of trying to finish them off

HANS SILVESTER/GETTY IMAGES

The president has his own interests to consider, Mr Oviedo says, including members of the conservative Free Brazil Movement, often described as the Brazilian equivalent of the far-right Tea Party offshoot of the Republicans in the United States.

Later this month, members plan to march along a 700km dirt road from Humaitá, near a strategic port in Amazonas state, to the state capital Manaus, to demand that the road be paved for improved truck access. “It’s the short-term guys, the ruralistas, who he’s nodding to in congress,” he said.

Previous governments have refused to finish the highway fearing it would destroy the environment. Mr Bolsonaro’s ministry of infrastructure appears to have far fewer

concerns. Marcelo Cavalcante, 40, a local businessman and MBL co-ordinator for Humaitá, said he was told that if they got “public support” behind them, the ministry would “help us with it” referring to the new road.

One road in one state in a sprawling country like Brazil might not sound much. But at risk, estimates suggest, is the loss of an area the size of Germany.

BRAZIL

Tree cover loss from 2001 to 2018

Slide arrow to see tree loss in pink

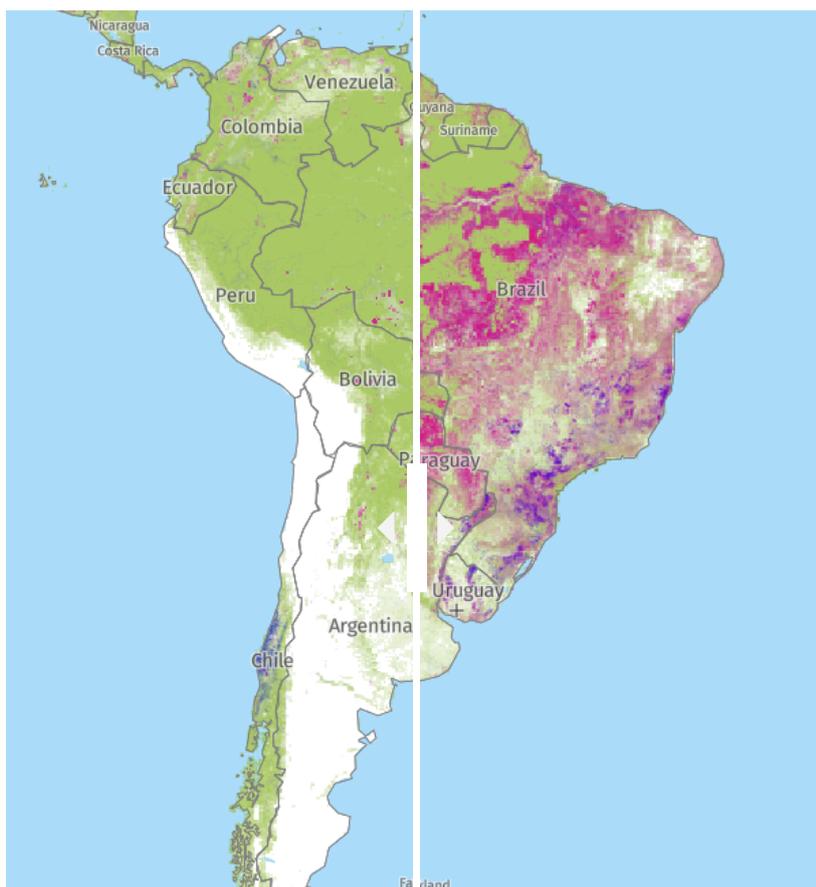




Photo Credits: 2001 Global Forest Watch 2018 Global Forest Watch

South America Politics Brazil

Share    Save 

Related articles

‘Trump of the Tropics’ dismisses Amazon deforestation as a lie

Matthew Campbell

Brazil’s far-right president has demonstrated his taste for alternative facts by dismissing as “a lie” satellite data from a national research...

July 21 2019

Bolsonaro brushes off French envoy to get hair cut

Adam Sage, Paris

President Bolsonaro of Brazil cancelled a meeting with France’s foreign minister to have his hair cut in what is being seen in Paris as a...

August 1 2019

Destruction of Brazil forests hits fastest rate in decade

Lucinda Elliott, São Paulo

Rainforest destruction in Brazil reached its highest level for a decade last year, raising fears of further increases under a far-right populist...

November 26 2018



Lessons in business life from Funding London CEO

SPONSORED



The wind power business that is tackling the looming climate crisis

SPONSORED



Food fraud costs the UK £11 billion a year. What can be done?

SPONSORED



Two men who lost their sons to suicide share their stories

SPONSORED

Comments are subject to our community guidelines, which can be viewed [here](#).

 [BACK TO TOP](#)

THE  TIMES

GET IN TOUCH

[About us](#)

[Contact us](#)

[Help](#)

[The Times Editorial Complaints](#)

[The Sunday Times Editorial](#)

[Place an announcement](#)

MORE FROM THE TIMES AND THE SUNDAY TIMES

[The Times e-paper](#)

[The Sunday Times e-paper](#)

[Times Currency Services](#)

[The Sunday Times Wine Club](#)

[The Times Academy](#)

[Times Print Gallery](#)

[The Times Archive](#)

[Times Crossword Club](#)

[Sunday Times](#)

[Times+](#)

[The Sunday Times](#)

[Times Expert](#)

| | | | | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| Complaints | Classified advertising | Driving | | Rich List | Traveller |
| | | Good University Guide | Schools Guide | Newsletters | Best Places to Live |
| Display advertising | The Times corrections | | Best Places to Stay | Announcements | Times Appointments |
| The Sunday Times corrections | | Podcasts | | | |

© Times Newspapers Limited 2019.

Registered in England No. 894646. Registered office: 1 London Bridge Street, SE1 9GF.

[Privacy & cookie policy](#) [Licensing](#) [Cookie settings](#) [Site map](#) [Topics](#) [Commissioning terms](#)
[Terms and conditions](#)

