

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami receives death threats

Directors and officials of the Yanomami Hutukara Association (Hutukara Associação Yanomami, HAY) have been living through a climate of insecurity ever since their president, Davi Kopenawa, received death threats and unknown persons have been prowling around the organization's headquarters.

Chronology of threats: This past May, one of the Hutukara directors, Armindo Góes, was walking through São Gabriel da Cachoeira in Amazonas when some gold prospectors approached him and said that people who suffered losses from government operations to shut down gold mines inside the TI Yanomami (Yanomami Indigenous Territory) were looking for Davi Kopenawa, warning that he would not live through the end of the year.

As a precaution, the Hutukara Association took measures to increase security at its Boa Vista headquarters and restricted the activities and movements of its president. However, in June, two armed men entered the headquarters of the Socioenvironmental Institute (Instituto Socioambiental, ISA) in Boa Vista, looking for Davi and ISA functionaries. Upon entering the office, they pulled out their pistols and announced a hold-up. They made off with all the computers, cell phones, and GPS devices. One of the criminals was later apprehended and said that they were hired to pull off the robbery by a prospector from a mine in Tumeremo in Venezuela.

Since that incident, motorcyclists have been sighted circling the Hutukara headquarters and asking about Davi's whereabouts.

Probable motives behind the threats

In recent years, the Hutukara Association has been collaborating with the National Indian Agency (Fundação Nacional do Índio, FUNAI) and the Federal Police by assisting in investigations that support operations against gold prospecting in Yanomami territory. Hutukara has been providing maps of mine sites, geographic coordinates of their locations, ID numbers of planes transporting miners, nicknames used by the pilots, and names of people who are financing the illegal activities. This systematic gathering of information has led the Federal Police to change their approach to combatting gold prospecting. In July 2012, they conducted Operation Xawara, which, for the first time, arrested pilots, ferry owners, and gem dealers. In January 2013, the Superintendent of the Federal

Police in the State of Roraima reported to the media that illegal activities surrounding mineral prospecting were worth \$30 million a month in the state.

Hutukara continues to call on the Federal Police to investigate the entire gold network involving activities in the TI Yanomami: who is financing the mining, who is buying the gold, and what the final destination is. It is also pressing the police to gather evidence necessary for drawing up criminal and civil charges against the people involved in the violating the law. Unfortunately, those financing the illegal mineral extraction are rarely identified and gold prospectors who are arrested are quickly released, returning to their illegal activities in the TI Yanomami.

Hutukara's work has given visibility to its president, Davi Kopenawa, who, over the last thirty years, has dedicated himself to vigorously defending his people on numerous fronts: getting the TI Yanomami demarcated; forcing the withdrawal of gold prospectors whose presence decimated a significant part of the Yanomami population in the late 1990s; setting up the first Indigenous Health District (Distrito de Saúde Indígena, DSEI), which served as a model for thirty-three more DSEIs in Brazil; creating an educational project specifically for the Yanomami; establishing the Yanomami Hutukara Association; and making the TI Yanomami sustainable.

Davi's work has been recognized on the national as well as international level. In March, 2012, the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), a program aimed at defending the defenders of human rights, honored Davi by producing a film about his work against gold prospecting in the TI Yanomami, and showing it at the International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights in Geneva, Switzerland. Davi has also received various prizes for his activities in defense of the rainforest and indigenous rights. In 1989, he was awarded the Global 500 Prize from the United Nations Environmental Program in New York; in 1999, he was decorated as a Knight in the Order of Rio Branco by President Cardoso in Brasilia; in 2009, he was honored by the Bartolomé de las Casas Committee in Madrid, and by the Ministry of Culture of Brazil with the Award of Knighthood in the Order of Cultural Merit; and in 2013, he received the Rio Branco Merit of Honor Award from the Municipal Council of Boa Vista.

It is crucial to consider the context of violence and insecurity that indigenous and environmental leaders face in Brazil. According to a report from the organization Global Witness, among the people assassinated in recent years internationally in the course of their work defending the environment, almost half were from Brazil.

Of the 908 assassinations that occurred worldwide between 2002 and 2013, 443 deaths took place in Brazil. The report charges that Brazilian officials do not monitor criminal networks operating in the Amazon region, they underestimate the conflicts over land, and they neglect to give support to families threatened by landowners and loggers. Due to the increase in violent incidents in the Amazon, Brazil is now the most dangerous country for those defending land rights and the environment.

Even if assassins are brought to justice, their sentences may be light. For example, during Operation Xawara in 2012, the Federal Police yet again apprehended Pedro Emiliano, a gold prospector who was sentenced for having participated in genocide in 1993, when sixteen people, including women and children, were murdered in the case known as the Haximú Massacre.

The Hutukara Association hereby calls on the Brazilian government to protect and guard not only the Yanomami people and land, but in particular, the physical safety of the Hutukara president, Davi Kopenawa.

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