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## Update on the humanitarian crisis in the Yanomami Indigenous Territory, Brazil

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IV Yanomami and Ye'kwana Leadership Forum statement July 2023



## **Update on the humanitarian crisis in the Yanomami Indigenous Territory, Brazil**

27 July 2023

Since January, when the new government took office, the humanitarian crisis in the Yanomami Territory has been highlighted in the media in Brazil and around the world. The government has launched various emergency actions to evict illegal miners and criminal gangs and contain violence, and to respond to the health crisis and widespread malnutrition caused by the illegal invasions. It established the Centro de Operação de Emergências Yanomami (COE-Yanomami - Center for Emergency Operations) on 26 January to coordinate all the emergency health measures in relation to the crisis<sup>1</sup>.

Among the first measures taken by the government were the following:

- The Ministry of Health declared a public health emergency and at least 1,000 Yanomami were identified and treated. The rescue efforts and evacuations of critically ill Yanomami have been supported by the Brazilian Air Force (FAB);
- 12 health professionals, linked to Brazil's public health care system SUS, arrived at CASAI (Indigenous Health Clinic) in Boa Vista to reinforce existing health teams. This clinic is responsible for treating Indigenous people in the state was overwhelmed and overcrowding, so a field hospital was also installed and started to operate near CASAI.
- The Federal Police opened an enquiry to investigate whether the crime of genocide had been committed by the previous Bolsonaro government. The Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship sent a delegation to the region to investigate human rights violations against the Yanomami people. This mission visited several communities and the Surucucu air base inside the Yanomami territory and spoke with leaders of civil society organizations and representatives of the government of Roraima state.
- A shipment of medicines and nutritional milk compound was delivered to CASAI, as well as basic food parcels for the affected communities in the Yanomami Territory.

### **Operation to remove illegal miners**

At the beginning of February, a major operation was launched to remove the thousands of miners who were operating illegally in the area.

Through the operation, the government began to reoccupy bases that had been abandoned or taken over by prospectors within the territory. The first point reoccupied was on the Uraricoera River, which is strategic for illegal activity, as boats used to supply diesel and food to numerous illegal *garimpos* (wild cat mines) pass through it.

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<sup>1</sup> Relatório Integrado Ações Emergenciais -11/05/23; Informes Semanais da COE Yanomami; Relatório Missão Yanomami, Janeiro/2023, SUS - Ministério da Saúde. Available in: <https://www.gov.br/saude/pt-br/composicao/svsa/resposta-a-emergencias/coes/coe-yanomami>

In the first week of the operation, an illegal mining area located less than 15 kilometers from a community of uncontacted Yanomami, called Moxihatëtëa, was destroyed<sup>2</sup>.

## Violence

But the actions of IBAMA (Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resource) and the Federal Police in the territory have met with resistance and attacks:

- At the end of February (23/02), armed miners broke through the inspection blockade and shot at IBAMA agents. The inspectors retaliated and one of the miners was shot. The inspection point is in the Yanomami community of Palimiú.
- On 14 March, a second attack occurred during an approach to miners in the Waikás region, on the Uraricoera River. Inspection agents exchanged fire with criminals. No-one was injured. Two miners were detained.
- On 1 April, inspectors from IBAMA and the Federal Highway Police were attacked by gunfire. Their helicopter hit by shots. No-one was injured.

At the end of April, more cases of violence were recorded in the region.

- on 30 April, three Yanomami were shot by illegal miners in Uxiu community. One of them was a health agent, who died soon after being rescued.
- on 1 May, Federal Highway Police agents were attacked while disembarking in the Waikás region. The officers fought back and shot four criminals, who did not survive their injuries. Days later, the bodies of eight miners were found by Federal Police agents in the region of Uxiu.

After this period of intense attacks, the Minister of Justice announced the installation of a new command in the region to remove miners and criminal gangs from the territory. This reinforcement was formed of two Federal Police delegates, an Army general and an Air Force brigadier, as well as representatives of various ministries. The mission was to carry out the "last phase" of the removal of invaders from the territory. The minister also confirmed that the government had already sent 475 military and police officers to reinforce security in the region.

In early July another case of violence was recorded in the region of Parima. A Yanomami girl was killed and five other Indigenous people were injured during an attack by miners.

## Health crisis

[The final statement of the IV Yanomami and Ye'kwana Leadership Forum](#) held in July 2023 notes that: "The vertiginous increase in mining, the influence of political interests and the corruption installed in the Yanomami and Ye'kwana DSEI - Special Indigenous Health District - destroyed our health.... To this day, many communities, especially the most distant ones, are still without health care".

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2 Government website news from 13/02/2023, available in: <https://www.gov.br/funai/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2023/acao-coordenada-encontra-garimpo-proximo-a-povos-isolados-na-ti-yanomami>

Despite the efforts of the federal government, the Yanomami health situation has remained highly critical for several months and still requires urgent attention.

The region of Surucucu is considered a reference point for health care in the territory. There is a basic health unit with precarious infra-structure. Indigenous people from various regions of the Yanomami Indigenous Territory, including those from remote areas who need to be transported by helicopter, are treated at this health center. Seriously ill patients who need to be evacuated by air are taken to CASAI or Roraima General Hospital in the case of adults, and to Santo Antônio Hospital in the case of children.

At the end of April, an Indigenous Health Center was built in the region of Surucucu, home to many Yanomami communities and one of the regions most affected by illegal mining. It has an outpatient clinic, reception room, triage, consulting rooms, pharmacy and stabilization rooms. The aim is to reduce patient removals to the capital. On its first day of operation, the center was almost at capacity, receiving Indigenous people with malnutrition, pneumonia and malaria. Xitei was also identified as a priority area as its health post had been closed due to insecurity posed by the presence of armed illegal miners.

From 2018 to 2022 the number of cases of malaria recorded by the DSEI (Special Indigenous Health District) exploded<sup>3</sup>, from 9,928 in 2018 to 20,393 in 2022- an increase of more than 105%. In 2022, 11,634 cases of malaria were recorded of which 3,478 (29.9%) were children from 0 to 9 years old (mainly children under three years old). Infant mortality rates among children under one year old are a large proportion of overall deaths among the Yanomami.

In addition to malnutrition and other diseases like TB and acute respiratory infections, mercury contamination also directly impacts many Yanomami and Ye'kwana in the territory<sup>4</sup>. A study carried out by the Federal Police<sup>5</sup> in February revealed that Indigenous people from 14 regions in the Yanomami Territory have high levels of mercury contamination. It found that 76.7% of the people studied are highly exposed to this toxic heavy metal. One Yanomami from the Baixo Catrimani region had 15.34 micro grams (*mg/g*) of mercury in their body, 15 times the WHO recommended limit.

## Positive Impacts

A Federal Police survey carried out in May showed that alerts of illegal mining in the Yanomami Territory have reduced by 96.6% compared to the same period last year. In April 2022, 444 alerts were registered and, in 2023, only 18 for the same period. The alerts are monitored through satellite images. The same survey carried out in June showed that new

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3 Relatório Missão Yanomami, Janeiro/2023, SUS - Ministério da Saúde. Available in: [https://www.gov.br/saude/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2023/fevereiro/arquivos/RelatorioYanomamiversao\\_FINAL\\_07\\_02.pdf](https://www.gov.br/saude/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2023/fevereiro/arquivos/RelatorioYanomamiversao_FINAL_07_02.pdf)

4 Globo news from 06/06/2022, available in: <https://g1.globo.com/rr/roraima/noticia/2022/06/06/rios-na-terra-yanomami-tem-8600percent-de-contaminacao-por-mercurio-revela-laudo-da-pf.ghtml>

5 Globo news from 21/03/2023, available in: <https://g1.globo.com/rr/roraima/noticia/2023/03/21/indigenas-de-14-regioes-na-terra-yanomami-tem-altos-niveis-de-contaminacao-por-mercurio-revela-laudo-da-policia-federal.ghtml>

illegal mining alerts had been reduced to zero for the first time since 2020<sup>6</sup>.

Since the beginning of the actions in February, the operation against illegal mining in the Yanomami Indigenous Territory has resulted in<sup>7</sup>:

- 44 arrests and the confiscation of R\$138 million (over US\$29 million) in assets;
- 42 mining sites destroyed and 323 camps dismantled, 71 dredges, 9 aircraft and 12 boats destroyed;
- in the first 30 days of the operation over 27 tons of cassiterite was seized.

However, according to the recent report by Yanomami organizations “Nós ainda estamos sofrendo”<sup>8</sup> the fact there are no alerts does not mean mining has totally ceased because the rainy season which started in late April makes remote sensing difficult due to heavy cloud cover and because some mines are in areas which are already deforested so no alterations in forest cover would be detected.

### **Much remains to be done**

The IV Yanomami and Ye'kwana Leadership Forum met from 10-14 July 2023 and released a statement directed at the Brazilian government. One of their overarching demands is that government departments follow the protocols the Yanomami and Ye'kwana published in 2019 on how to consult them and adhere to the Yanomami and Ye'kwana Land and Environment Management Plan (PGTA) which sets out how they wish to live and manage their land for the benefit of future generations.

They state that: “The results of the actions taken to date are far from sufficient. The miners continue to enter and destroy our forest. We are still dying from lack of health care both inside our territory and outside it, when our relatives are removed and have to spend a long time suffering in the city.”

### **It is crucial that the government enact the following:**

#### 1. Remove all miners and criminal gangs from the Yanomami Territory

The government estimates<sup>9</sup> that 80% of the approximately 25,000 illegal miners who were in the Yanomami Territory at the start of the operation have already left. Those who remain are probably linked to criminal factions that have already shown they are willing to resist and

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6 CNN Brasil News from 20/06/2023, available in: <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/nacional/nao-ha-mais-alertas-de-garimpo-ilegal-no-territorio-yanomami-diz-pf/>

7 UOL Notícias from, available in: <https://noticias.uol.com.br/colunas/jamil-chade/2023/06/26/governo-anuncia-confisco-de-r-138-milhoes-de-invasores-de-terras-indigenas.htm>

8 Report “Yamaki ni ohotai xoa! = Nós ainda estamos sofrendo: um balanço dos primeiros meses da emergência yanomami.”, available in: <https://acervo.socioambiental.org/acervo/documentos/yamaki-ni-ohotai-xoa-nos-ainda-estamos-sofrendo-um-balanco-dos-primeiros-meses-da>

9 Repórter Brasil news from 10/07/2023, available in: <https://reporterbrasil.org.br/2023/07/so-restam-os-garimpeiros-ligados-ao-narcotrafico-na-terra-indigena-yanomami-diz-ministra-sonia-guajajara/>

use violence to intimidate and kill Yanomami, and even armed federal agents.

The formation of the so-called “narcogarimpo” or “narco-mines” and the change in behavior of the invading gold miners is a recent phenomenon that has been recorded mainly since 2019. The price of gold and the lack of surveillance in the area, which is on the border with Venezuela and a strategic position for drug trafficking, attracted members of factions such as the First Command of the Capital (PCC) to the mines. In addition to the PCC, the Comando Vermelho and Venezuelan factions have come to control activities in mining areas.

The actions of these criminal factions have sustained the permanence of illegal miners in the Yanomami Territory. Until all illegal miners and criminal groups are removed and judged in court, the Yanomami communities in the mining areas will not be able to live in peace or resume their self-sufficient way of life, based on hunting, gathering, fishing and farming. When they cannot be self-sufficient, they suffer from acute malnutrition, which means they are less able to resist or recover from serious illnesses such as malaria, now endemic in the region.

While the criminal gangs and miners remain in the territory, health teams are unwilling to travel through the forest to attend remote Yanomami communities which are in desperate need of medical care.

Survival has received reports that although emergency health teams are working in the field hospital at Surucucu (one of the regions most affected by illegal mining with many large communities), many remote Yanomami communities have not received any emergency health care because medical teams refuse to travel through the forest to reach them because they are concerned about being attacked by criminal gangs and armed miners who remain in the territory. This is extremely concerning as these Yanomami are at the mercy of the gangs and are likely to suffer from treatable diseases like malaria, and malnutrition. We have also received reports that some Yanomami are refusing the basic food parcels because they contain foods like dried meat which they do not eat. The baskets contain basic but not very nutritious food.

There have been criticisms that the army and air force are not doing enough to support the operation to remove the miners. For example, no operational base has been established in Homoxi, one of the regions most affected by mining.

## 2. Health

It is essential that the scope of the emergency health response is broadened and includes remote communities which are often several days' walk from the main health posts and who are likely to be suffering from serious health problems as they have not had access to medical

teams and medicines for months if not years<sup>10</sup>.

Following the gold mining invasions of 1985-1993, the health care NGO Urihi Saúde Yanomami was set up and established a network of primary health care posts throughout the territory and trained Yanomami health agents. They succeeded in eradicating malaria.

It is important that SESAI/DSEI:

- reopens health posts that were closed and renovates old and decaying posts.
- supplies health posts with sufficient medicines and equipment.
- restructures health work, builds and equips more primary health care posts and employs more doctors and nurses to work in the field for long periods of time.
- trains more Yanomami and Ye'kwana health agents who can communicate with communities and live in situ.
- ensures clean drinking water and sanitation is available in all communities.

The Yanomami and Ye'kwana Leadership Forum calls for Yanomami patients to be treated in their communities and to not be evacuated to the CASAI (Indigenous Health Clinic) in the city of Boa Vista which is extremely overcrowded and has more patients than it can handle. When patients are discharged, they can wait months for transport to return home which compounds the overcrowding. The Yanomami and Ye'kwana Leadership Forum calls for the CASAI to be renovated and for a series of CASAIs to be built exclusively for the Yanomami in four municipalities in Amazonas state.

### 3. Food security

The Yanomami who live in areas destroyed by mining are suffering extreme malnutrition as they are too ill to hunt, fish and collect garden produce to feed their families. Fish and water have been contaminated by mercury and much game and fish have either been hunted by the miners for food or scared off by the noise of the mining machinery which operates day and night. It will take several years for their gardens and game numbers to recover. The government has delivered emergency health packs but much of the food has little nutritional value and some such as dried beef is considered inedible by many Yanomami.

It is important that the government:

- consults the Yanomami and Ye'kwana on how best to provide and deliver nutritional food for communities while they rebuild their livelihoods.
- strengthens the Yanomami and Ye'kwana's traditional farming systems and provides farming tools and seeds to regrow crops like corn, melons, squash and manioc.

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10 Report "Yamaki ni ohotai xoa! = Nós ainda estamos sofrendo: um balanço dos primeiros meses da emergência yanomami.", available in: <https://acervo.socioambiental.org/acervo/documentos/yamaki-ni-ohotai-xoa-nos-ainda-estamos-sofrendo-um-balanco-dos-primeiros-meses-da>



- helps those communities devastated by mining by supplying alternative sources of protein and by supplying seeds and cultivars to help restore their forest gardens.
- continue to provide emergency food parcels with diverse and appropriate foods.

#### 4. Restoration of destroyed forest and rivers

The contamination of rivers with mercury, oil and effluents from hydraulic dredges and the consequent impacts on the health of the Yanomami and Ye'kwana are extremely serious with lifelong consequences for families and unborn children.

A recent survey<sup>11</sup> led by INPE (National Institute for Space Research) and Fiocruz, in partnership with InfoAmazônia, revealed the extent of the damage caused by the illegal mining invasion to the rivers and communities in the Yanomami territory. The results show that 59% of the inhabited rivers, i.e. those that are home to nearby communities, show strong signs of contamination.

The study also found that 62% of Yanomami are directly impacted by mining. This percentage relates to more than 17,000 Indigenous people. The regions of Waikás, Sauba, Ericó, Paapiu, Baixo Mucajaí, Apiaú, Haxiu and Marari stood out with more than 80% of the population and communities at immediate risk.

Monitoring by Hutukara Yanomami Association (HAY)<sup>12</sup> demonstrated an accumulated growth of 309% in deforestation linked to illegal mining between October 2019 and December 2022 (the period corresponding to Jair Bolsonaro's election to the end of his presidency).

Since it started monitoring in 2018, HAY has revealed that more than 5,504 hectares of forest were destroyed in the Yanomami Territory. Most of the destruction was along the Uraricoera and Mucajaí rivers in the north of the territory.

Huge craters gouged out of the forest and full of stagnant water are optimal breeding grounds for malarial mosquitos. Collapsed rivers banks and destroyed riverbeds will take years to recuperate and the Yanomami will need support to do this.

#### 5. Long-term territorial protection and monitoring plan

The emergency actions to remove the illegal miners and to contain the health disaster were and still are fundamental to dealing with the crisis that has spread in the territory in recent

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11 InfoAmazonia news from 21/06/2023, available in: <https://infoamazonia.org/2023/06/21/analise-inedita-revela-que-59-dos-rios-habitados-pelos-yanomami-sofrem-impacto-do-garimpo-e-invasoes/>

12 Report "Yamaki ni ohotai xoa! = Nós ainda estamos sofrendo: um balanço dos primeiros meses da emergência yanomami.", available in: <https://acervo.socioambiental.org/acervo/documentos/yamaki-ni-ohotai-xoa-nos-ainda-estamos-sofrendo-um-balanco-dos-primeiros-meses-da>

years, but much remains to be done to ensure the permanent protection of the land and lives of the Yanomami people.

Yanomami and Ye'kwana organizations and NGOs including Survival International are concerned that the government has not announced any plan for the permanent protection and monitoring of the Yanomami Territory. This is essential if the miners are to be prevented from returning.

Brazilian media reports indicate that many expelled miners are in the state capital in Boa Vista biding their time until the Yanomami operation finishes in the expectation of returning to the territory. If there is no protection and monitoring plan in place, thousands will return as has happened after every operation to remove illegal miners in the last three decades. Many miners have travelled to other Indigenous territories in Roraima and neighboring countries such as Venezuela and Guyana to continue mining in indigenous territories there.

Permanent protection of the territory will require specialist field workers, the construction of field bases and protection posts especially in the areas where there are uncontacted Yanomami communities and in strategic entry points along rivers and roads, and use of satellite imagery and overflights to detect illegal activities.

To be effective it will need proper and guaranteed funding, and the willingness of federal authorities such as the police, IBAMA and armed forces to co-operate and launch joint actions to deal with criminal acts and invasions in the future.

The Yanomami and Ye'kwana Leadership Forum is calling for FUNAI's regional CTLs (local technical coordination units) to be reactivated and for no entry signs to be placed along the Yanomami Territory's borders and for these to be monitored.

## 6. Bring criminals to justice

To secure justice for shattered Yanomami families and to prevent future invasions, the judiciary must hold to account those behind the invasions who profit from the illegal gold trade. They and all those involved in the illegal invasions (miners, criminal gangs, shop owners, pilots and owners of aircraft) must be arrested and tried for criminal activities.

## 7. Supply chains

In June, President Lula sent a draft bill to congress which aims to change the legislation concerning the gold trade and tighten the rules on buying, selling and transporting gold and improving mechanism for tracing it. It is crucial that this is voted through and enacted.



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