

UNCONTACTED INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: AT THE EDGE OF SURVIVAL

Survival International



Uncontacted Indigenous Peoples: at the edge of survival

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Uncontacted Indigenous Peoples: at the edge of survival

by Survival International



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FOREWORD

by Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, Brazil

There are many uncontacted Indigenous peoples. I don't know them, but they have the same blood as us, my relatives who live in the forest and have never seen the non-Indigenous peoples' world. We all breathe the same air.

They are suffering just like we are. The napë [non-Indigenous people] are always wanting more and destroying nature looking for natural resources.

All Indigenous peoples were born with a deep connection to the land, and they are still born with this today. We are different from the city people. The napë do not know us and they do not know our roots. We look after nature, and nature looks after us. It is important for all Indigenous peoples, including the uncontacted peoples, to stay on the land where we were born. The place where Indigenous peoples live, fish, hunt and plant must be protected. The authorities must recognize that this is Indigenous land.

Uncontacted peoples are in their homes because they chose those places! They are not starving! They have food to eat, game to hunt and fruits like açai and bacaba to collect from which to make juice.

Uncontacted Indigenous people in Brazil seen from the air during a Brazilian government monitoring overflight, 2010. © G. Miranda/ FUNAI/Survival International

I want to help my uncontacted relatives. I don't want them to be sad, to suffer. We, the peoples of the forest, have never suffered, but now we are suffering because the city people are destroying the beauty of our forest and they're coming closer, building roads, clearing the way for outsiders to enter and occupy our lands.

The authorities must respect our right to live in our place, on our land. Without the Indigenous peoples and without the forest, there is no life.

It is very important for uncontacted Indigenous peoples to be able to live on their land. The whole world must know that they are there in their forest. The authorities must respect their right to live there.

This is my opinion as a xapiri (shaman) and leader.

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami



ABOUT THIS REPORT:

Survival International has campaigned for the rights of Indigenous peoples, including uncontacted peoples, since 1969. Working closely with Indigenous peoples and communities, we campaign globally for the rights and self-determination of all uncontacted peoples, wherever they are in the world.

This report offers an overview of the state of the world's uncontacted Indigenous peoples, drawing on Survival International's unique expertise, unparalleled research and wide-ranging networks. Survival works with many dozens of Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations in all 10 of the countries where uncontacted peoples live. Our researchers spend extensive time in communities neighboring uncontacted peoples, or with people who have only recently had contact with outsiders, building relationships that in many cases have lasted decades. We are part of a strong community of activists, academics, lawyers and government agents with unique insight into the situations of uncontacted peoples wherever they live. Our current research team includes experts who have been working for Survival on uncontacted Indigenous peoples' rights since the 1990s.

For this report, Survival has produced the most up-to-date global estimate ever done of the number of uncontacted Indigenous peoples and groups, and compiled details of the nature and extent of the threats facing all of them. The report explores the catastrophic impact of forced contact and land theft, reveals the specific threats facing the world's uncontacted peoples today, and highlights the genocides of these peoples. It explains the legal framework to support uncontacted Indigenous peoples, and explores their resilience; it unpacks

how they, their Indigenous neighbors, and other allies like Survival International are resisting and fighting back. The report ends with recommendations and conclusions for supporting uncontacted peoples' right to live as they choose on their own lands.

This report — and the resistance it documents — has only been possible because of the dedicated and tireless work of Indigenous and non-Indigenous activists and organizations over many years. A full list of acknowledgements can be found at the end of this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Part 1: Uncontacted Indigenous peoples

Survival International has calculated that there are at least 196 uncontacted Indigenous groups and peoples living in 10 countries around the world. They avoid contact with outsiders and have no permanent relationship with them.

Some entire Indigenous peoples are uncontacted, including the Sentinelese in India. Some uncontacted groups — such as the Ayoreo Totobiegosode in the Paraguayan Chaco or the Hongana Manyawa in Indonesia — are part of bigger tribes with whom they share a language and often a territory. They are also known as isolated peoples, free peoples, peoples in voluntary isolation, and by other names.

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples are aware of the existence of outsiders, but they make an active and ongoing choice to reject contact. Increased pressure on their lands contributes to greater outside documentation of their presence, while increasing their awareness of outsiders. Their rejection of contact is often rooted in experiences of devastating invasion and contact. It is a clear expression of their autonomy and self-determination.

Uncontacted peoples' homes are in forests, and their territories provide their shelter and livelihoods. They are also the core of their identity, culture, resilience and

resistance. A full 95 percent of uncontacted peoples and groups live in the Amazon — especially in Brazil, home to 124 groups, as well as in Peru, Colombia, Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador. Some live in the dry forests of the Paraguayan and Bolivian Chaco, in Indonesia, in West Papua, and in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands. They have the right to their land and to determine whether and to what extent they have contact with outsiders.

Part 2: At the edge of survival

All uncontacted peoples have at least one current threat to their land and survival. The threats to almost half are so severe that they could be wiped out in the next 10 years. Greed, racism and colonization are killing uncontacted peoples, by forcing them into contact, whether violently or otherwise, and through the theft and destruction of their lands.

Contact exposes uncontacted peoples to diseases to which they have no immunity. In the Brazilian Amazon, more than 80 percent of newly contacted Indigenous peoples are typically killed by disease. Contact-induced disease kills huge numbers of people across the world, weakens survivors, and causes extreme trauma and grief.

Contact is almost invariably accompanied by the theft and destruction of lands on which these peoples rely for food, water, shelter and medicine. A full 99 percent of uncontacted Indigenous peoples and groups face threats focused on their land, whether from governments, industry or criminals.

Racist and colonialist stereotyping is used to justify forcing Indigenous peoples into contact and off their land. Missionaries — often well funded and equipped with advanced technology — are targeting more than one in six uncontacted groups in the name of 'salvation', despite a history of causing

countless deaths and devastating epidemics. In Asia and the Pacific in particular, government officials stereotype uncontacted peoples as 'primitive' or 'stone age' to justify forced settlement and assimilation. This all paves the way for exploitation and land theft.

Governments have long placed the 'national interest' and projects of nation-building and economic development above the rights of uncontacted Indigenous peoples, with at least 38 peoples or groups now directly threatened by government-sponsored infrastructure plans. In the name of national identity, Indonesia has, since 1963, imposed a brutal reign of terror on West Papua — which is still home to at least two uncontacted groups. Indian government plans for a mega-project, including a huge industrial port, on the island of Great Nicobar risk annihilation of the mostly uncontacted Shompen. At least 28 groups in Brazil face existential threats from government-sponsored projects including dams, roads, and railways.

Profit-driven activities of resource extraction and exploitation are the greatest threats — affecting a full 96 percent of all uncontacted peoples and groups. Of these, logging poses the greatest danger, directly threatening nearly 65 percent while opening the way for other industries. Mining threatens more than 40 percent, and agribusiness more than 20 percent. Oil and gas exploration is a severe danger to uncontacted peoples in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru, as well as some in Brazil. Tourism and the risk of forced contact by wannabe adventurers and social media influencers are also growing dangers.

Criminal gangs are behind much of the exploitation of uncontacted Indigenous peoples' land in the Amazon, including wildly destructive goldmining. Despite the existence of laws against such activity, it often takes place

with the complicity of local and even national politicians. It is often linked to gangs trafficking drugs, who threaten more than 30 percent of uncontacted groups, all in the Amazon. These criminals often murder Indigenous people who stand against them.

The results of contact are catastrophic — the devastating and predictable deaths of children, parents, siblings and friends on a genocidal scale which results in the total annihilation of uncontacted peoples. The danger is ongoing. Mass deaths of uncontacted peoples are underreported and are at least as likely to be brought about by mining and ranching (facilitated by legislation or government policy that permits such activity) as by guns and violence. Yanomami organizations have been reporting the risk of genocide from rampant and ruinous goldmining in Yanomami territories in Brazil and Venezuela, which may also affect uncontacted groups. Genocide scholars warn of potential genocides of the Hongana Manyawa and Shompen, caused by government-backed nickel mining and an industrial mega-project, respectively. These are just a few of the more than 90 uncontacted groups which will be wiped out within 10 years if current activity that threatens them and their land is not stopped.

Part 3: Resistance and resilience

International law is firmly on the side of uncontacted peoples. Like all Indigenous peoples, they have collective ownership rights over their land, and they also have the right to reject contact. International law requires Free, Prior and Informed Consent for any activity on their land by outsiders. Since consent is not possible from uncontacted

peoples, international law prohibits all activity or development by outsiders on their land.

National laws vary in whether they uphold these standards. The law is generally stronger in South America than in Asia and the Pacific, though even in South America anti-Indigenous politicians continually attack it. Implementation is often weak. Companies and industries must ensure international human rights law principles are incorporated into their standards and practices, and then enforce those principles.

Uncontacted peoples are resilient and, when not under attack, they thrive. Evidence points to their lifestyles being healthy, and their communities thriving, rooted in strong botanical and ecological expertise, and exceptional environmental stewardship.

The actions they take to evade contact are in themselves acts of resistance. Many peoples leave signs, snares or traps to ward off outsiders, marking hunting paths with crossed spears or snares made with wood and animal teeth. When directly approached, they may brandish weapons or even attack. Their clear wishes to refuse contact must be respected.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and organizations are working hard to support their struggle. Many Indigenous people — such as the Guajajara Guardians who share territory with the Awá in the eastern Amazon, Yine who neighbor the Mashco Piro in Peru, Tobelo neighbors of the Hongana Manyawa in Indonesia, Nicobarese neighbors of the Shompen in India, and many others — support their uncontacted neighbors by monitoring their land, reporting invasions or calling for stronger land protection. Indigenous organisations lobby governments and companies, bring court cases, and alert the media. Non-Indigenous allies — from Brazilian government agents who protect uncontacted peoples' land in the Amazon,

to anthropologists, journalists, NGOs and Survival supporters worldwide — are working to bring attention to the struggles and the rights of uncontacted peoples, even when the work is dangerous.

Part 4: The way forward

If their rights are recognized, respected and enforced, uncontacted Indigenous peoples survive and thrive.

Uncontacted peoples everywhere are under attack — yet they are resilient, with an unparalleled ability to flourish on their own land.

Governments must incorporate into domestic law all relevant international laws, norms and declarations which uphold Indigenous peoples' rights to their land and territories, to self-determination, to refuse contact if they are uncontacted, and to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC). National legislation must make explicit that these laws apply to uncontacted Indigenous peoples. The laws and declarations include ILO Convention 169, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and — where relevant — the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

National governments must properly enforce all laws recognizing uncontacted Indigenous peoples' rights. This includes providing necessary funding, offering political and institutional support, and creating administrative procedures to demarcate, protect and monitor Indigenous territories, to enforce the no-contact principle, and to prevent or end invasions. Laws are crucial — but they are worthless without enforcement.

All industries, companies and individuals must recognize and respect that no contact means no consent, and no consent means no contact. Industry and company standards must include requirements not to operate on or source from uncontacted peoples' territories, or to include in supply chains any companies operating in these territories. They must include clear commitments to FPIC, backed by a prohibition on attempting contact and the understanding that consent is not possible from uncontacted peoples.

The public — as citizens, as voters and as consumers — can help put a stop to the attacks on uncontacted Indigenous peoples and exploitation of their land. By supporting Indigenous peoples and Survival's campaigns, individuals can pressure governments, companies, industry bodies and other organizations, demanding they respect uncontacted Indigenous peoples' rights to their lands, to self-determination and to be uncontacted.

Pushed to the edge, uncontacted Indigenous peoples around the world have shown they will not give up. They are resisting day in, day out. They are adapting to their changing surroundings and circumstances. They are finding survival strategies and, where outsiders are kept away from their lands, they are thriving. The rest of the world must respect their wishes and their rights to ensure that they can continue to live as they choose.



PART ONE: Uncontacted Indigenous peoples

“

Since the time of their ancestors, the Hongana Manyawa have been living in the rainforest. When [my uncontacted relatives] are connected to the rainforest, they are connected to the universe. They don't want to be connected with the outside world.”

Hongana Manyawa man, Indonesia, speaking anonymously to Survival, 2024

The Hongana Manyawa regularly erect symbolic barriers on the borders of their territory to warn away outsiders. Many uncontacted peoples around the world make similar markers. © Oncy Oni

1. Indigenous peoples who reject contact

On the forested Indonesian island of Halmahera in Southeast Asia, an estimated 500 Hongana Manyawa people live in their ancestral forest without contact with outsiders. In April 2023, when Survival International launched a campaign against the nickel mining devastating their territory and threatening their survival, very few people outside the island were aware of their existence. The mining companies digging up their forest have known of them for at least a dozen years — but ignored or denied that knowledge in their rush for profitable minerals. The refusal of the Hongana Manyawa to abandon their territory, the vocal support of Indigenous relatives and allies on the island, and the campaigning of supporters in Indonesia and around the world has disrupted these plans — one major partner has since withdrawn, some potential buyers have made statements supportive of uncontacted Indigenous peoples' rights, and some Indonesian politicians have spoken out. The uncontacted Hongana Manyawa are under attack — but their fight goes on.

Their story illustrates some crucial facts about Indigenous peoples living without contact:

- while few in number, there are still far more of them than is widely understood;
- they are spread from the Amazon to the Pacific;
- they can thrive, independently and self-sufficiently, without contact, in environments that others would find extremely challenging;
- industrial society poses a devastating threat;
- uncontacted peoples and their allies are fighting back by resisting and drawing attention to these threats.

The dangers uncontacted peoples face today are part of an ongoing pattern of colonialism, that values the plans and profits of industrial society above the humanity, dignity and rights of uncontacted Indigenous peoples — and above their very existence. In particular, the rush by extractive industries and agribusiness to seize the resources of uncontacted peoples risks their total annihilation.

But by raising awareness of uncontacted Indigenous peoples' presence and their clearly expressed wishes, by demanding respect for their rights from governments, companies and industry bodies, we can support their struggle and help ensure that uncontacted Indigenous peoples can live as they wish on their own land.

This report is part of that fight.

Terminology

There is no perfect term for Indigenous peoples who live without contact with outsiders. While Survival generally uses the term “uncontacted” in English, they are also referred to as peoples living “in voluntary isolation” — a phrase that originated with anthropologists in Peru — including in international law. In Brazil, the term “isolados” (isolated people) is generally used, although there are other terms; some Manchineri Indigenous activists, for example, use a term that could be translated as “wary relative”¹, while some activists use “free peoples”². Some Brazilian anthropologists reject the framing of “isolation”, suggesting uncontacted peoples should be recognized as “refugees in their own land”³.

There are many other terms recognized as interchangeable, as the United Nations Human Rights Council noted in 2009, stating, “while there is no consensus on what term should be used to denote these peoples, the concept most frequently used in the international sphere is “peoples in isolation”. In some countries they are known as free, uncontacted, hidden or invisible peoples, peoples in voluntary isolation, etc. The formulations used may vary, but all of them refer to the same concept.”⁴

1.1 Many uncontacted peoples

“

The uncontacted people are like us before we were contacted. They move from place to place, and when they see a white person, they flee. But I can assure you that they are there.”

Salomon Dunu, Matsés, Peru, to Survival, 2012

There are at least 196 uncontacted Indigenous peoples or groups living in 10 different countries in South America, Asia and the Pacific. The presence of uncontacted peoples has become better documented in the last 25 years, owing in part to easier communications, an increase in land protection efforts by neighboring Indigenous people, and some improved government monitoring. The intensifying pressure on the forests and resources of uncontacted peoples has also, at times, forced them to be more visible. For these same reasons, many uncontacted peoples likely know an increasing amount about their Indigenous and non-Indigenous neighbors.

Survival International has established that there is credible evidence of at least 196 uncontacted Indigenous peoples or groups around the world today — that is, Indigenous peoples who avoid contact with outsiders and have no permanent relationship with them, even while being aware of the outside world. In the United Nations definition, they are “indigenous peoples or subgroups thereof that do not maintain regular contact with the majority population and tend to shun any type of contact with outsiders”⁵. Remaining uncontacted is an ongoing and active choice made in reaction to their circumstances.

In 2000, we estimated that there were “at least 70 uncontacted peoples in the world”⁶. We have continued to revise and add to this number, reaching the current estimate of 196 — the most up-to-date and most detailed calculation of the number of uncontacted Indigenous peoples worldwide⁷. Uncontacted peoples’ presence is better documented than ever, because of a mixture of improved government monitoring in some places⁸, easier communications, Indigenous organizations’ work, and the commitment of neighboring Indigenous peoples to monitor the wellbeing and protect the land of their uncontacted neighbors. At the same time, intense pressure to exploit the resources of forests in South America, Asia and the Pacific — as for example in Halmahera — have increasingly forced uncontacted people into encounters with outsiders. The appearances of Mashco Piro men and boys on a riverbank in Peru in 2024, and a young man in Mamoriá Grande, Brazil, in 2025 are recent examples.

Just as we are aware of uncontacted peoples, so are they aware of us. Uncontacted peoples’ decision to avoid contact with others is a deliberate expression of agency, not a product of ignorance. They have an ongoing relationship with outside societies — but that relationship is one of avoidance and resistance rather than contact and integration. There is a

spectrum of possible interaction for peoples who are considered uncontacted. Some might have sporadic encounters with neighboring Indigenous people or others in the area, raid nearby villages, or shout warnings or messages from a distance. The Hi-Merimã in Brazil appear to have regular interaction with other uncontacted people from different tribes. Even those avoiding any contact and staying completely out of sight will still be aware of others in their territories — increasingly so as pressure on that territory intensifies — or have heard stories passed down by previous generations. Most have acquired metal tools through inter-tribal trading, by taking them from neighboring Indigenous or non-Indigenous communities, or by finding them abandoned or washed up on shore.

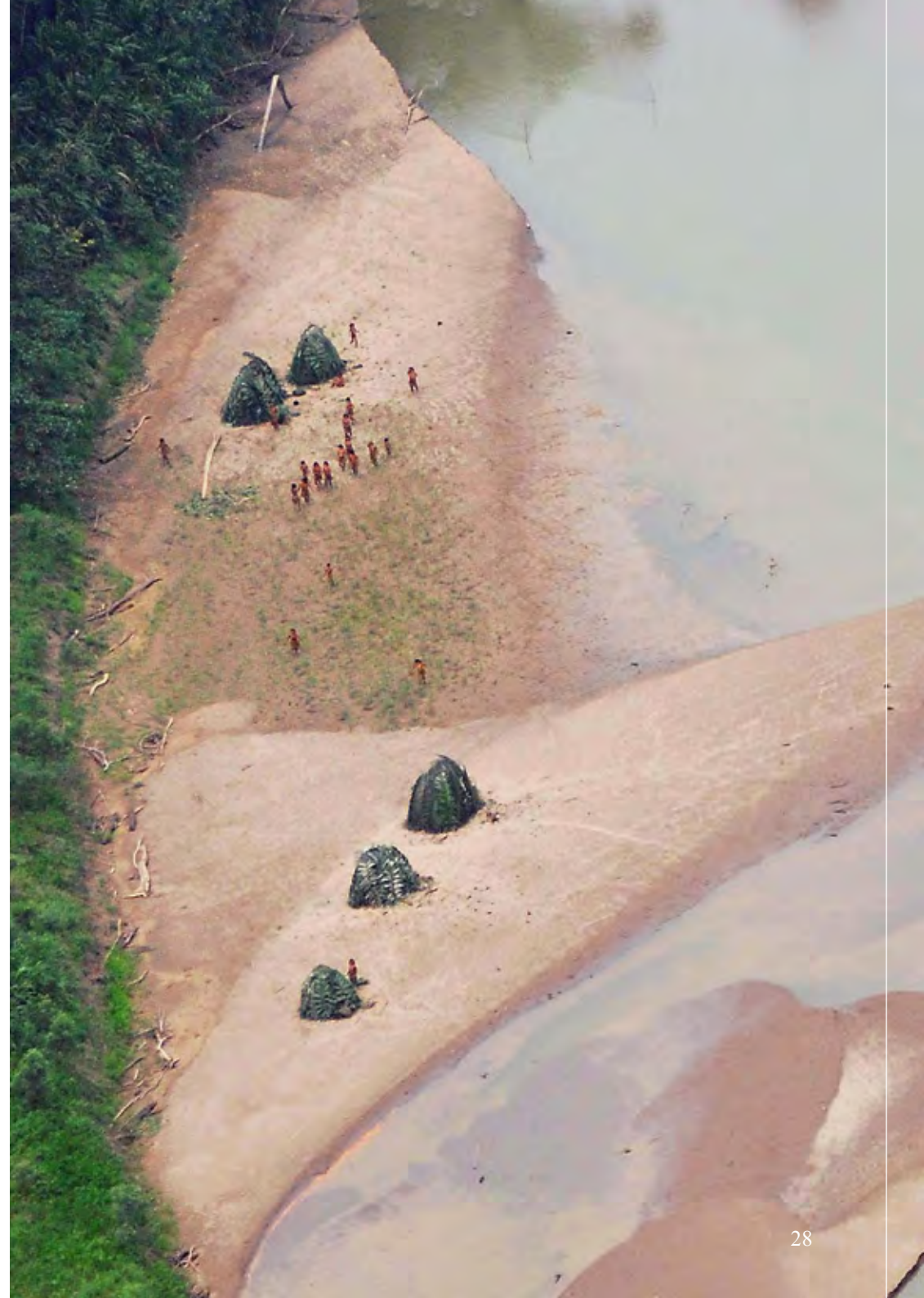
Encounters or mutual knowledge are most likely between uncontacted peoples and neighboring Indigenous peoples — especially if they are close relatives. It is often Indigenous neighbors who are the first to report evidence of the presence of uncontacted groups, encounters with them, or signs that they have been attacked. In 1995, a group of recently contacted Kanoê people reported to the Brazilian authorities that seven otherwise uncontacted Akuntsu, whom they occasionally encountered, had survived brutal massacres by gunmen hired by ranchers clearing the land for cattle grazing.

In some cases, all that outsiders know of uncontacted peoples comes from traces left in the forest — footprints, abandoned shelters, gardens, hunting trails and traps, markings on trees, items of pottery. In 1998, the Massaco Indigenous Territory became the first Indigenous territory in Brazil to be fully recognized solely for an uncontacted people before outsiders had seen the territory’s Indigenous inhabitants. Photographs of the uncontacted people of that territory have since been published. We cannot know how much they have observed or learned about other Indigenous or non-Indigenous society.

In the face of overwhelming evidence, some continue to cast doubts on the existence of uncontacted peoples, specifically or in general. Journalists are occasionally skeptical (even if some later retract their doubts⁹). But more often the challenges come from those whose vested interests depend on claims that uncontacted peoples' land is empty — just as colonizers always have.¹⁰ Former President Alan Garcia of Peru claimed in 2007 that the “‘unconnected’ [sic] Amazon native” was invented by environmentalists opposed to oil drilling.¹¹ Bolsonaro-era officials in Brazil conspired to suppress evidence of uncontacted people in the Ituna Itatá territory in order to open it for cattle-ranching.¹² And French mining company Eramet, operating on Hongana Manyawa land, claimed in 2023, with breathtaking dishonesty, “Today, even in vast areas like Amazonia, these populations do not really exist.”¹³

Such claims are part of the broader assault on uncontacted Indigenous peoples' rights and lands — but the support of Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies makes it harder than ever to get away with them.

Mashco Piro people on the banks of Las Piedras River, Peru, 2007. The Mashco Piro build temporary huts in the summer on river banks, where they fish and collect turtle eggs.
© Heinz Plenge Pardo/Frankfurt Zoological Society



196

Uncontacted peoples
and groups worldwide

10

Countries with uncontacted
Indigenous peoples

750+

Estimated population of most
populous uncontacted people
(Mashco Piro, Peru)

8

Uncontacted peoples in Asia
and the Pacific

187

Uncontacted peoples and groups
in the Amazon

124

Uncontacted groups in Brazil

26

Uncontacted peoples and groups in
Yavari-Tapiche area, Brazil & Peru

1

Uncontacted people in Paraguay

“

You can't tell me from an office that
uncontacted peoples don't exist. I
grew up with them around. They took
away my dad when he was 26. He
came back 8 years later. He only taught
us to respect them. Today I protect
the brothers and sisters in voluntary
isolation and initial contact.”

Pablo Chota, Yagua Indigenous person, Peru, 2024



The Sentinelese people, India

In early January 2005, news outlets all over the world published a photograph of a lone man standing on a beach among scrub and rock, aiming his bow and arrow up towards the camera. The photo was taken from the window of an Indian Coast Guard helicopter as it flew over North Sentinel Island on 28 December 2004. The Indian Ocean tsunami, which killed almost 230,000 people across 14 countries, had struck only days before, and North Sentinel Island was one of the first land masses to be hit by the colossal wave.

The Coast Guard flight found no evidence that the island's Indigenous inhabitants — known to outsiders as the Sentinelese — had suffered any harm from the deadly waves. And the man standing on the beach appeared to send very clearly the same message that the Sentinelese have sent for well over a century to those approaching their island: leave us alone.

The Sentinelese are the most isolated tribe on Earth. Living alone on North Sentinel, an island the size of Manhattan in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands archipelago, they have had almost no opportunity to develop resistance to diseases from

outside, making them especially vulnerable to devastating epidemics. But what they lack in resistance to pathogens they make up for in their resistance to outsiders and their vigorous protection of their isolation and their island.

Known contact attempts have been taking place for at least 140 years, and have been rejected by the Sentinelese, who first warn off and then attack anyone who tries to come near. Given the devastating population collapse of other tribes in the Andaman Islands, this is likely to have saved the Sentinelese from being entirely wiped out.

From the 1960s to the late 1990s, there were intermittent attempts by the Indian authorities to contact the tribe. Although occasionally accepting coconuts and other gifts, the Sentinelese regularly fired arrows at these contact missions if they got too close, and at times attacked their boats with adzes. In 1974, an official contact mission accompanied by a crew from the Indian government's Films Division left items including cloths, a doll and a Yorkshire pig along the shore. The Sentinelese speared both the doll and the pig — burying the latter on the beach — and shot arrows towards the party, one landing in a filmmaker's thigh.

Despite the Sentinelese's obvious determination to remain uncontacted, they have still faced intruders. In 2006, two local men, who moored their boat near North Sentinel to sleep after fishing illegally in the waters around the island, were killed when their boat broke loose and drifted onto the shore.

In 2018, the Sentinelese made headlines again when they killed John Allen Chau, an American missionary. Having warned him off with arrows when he first attempted to land on their island, they killed him when he made a second attempt to invade their territory and convert them to Christianity.

In 2025, a would-be social media influencer was arrested for landing briefly on North Sentinel Island, although he had no contact with any Sentinelese.

Based on what can be observed from a distance, the Sentinelese are extremely healthy and appear to be thriving. Their determined resistance and their clear message to the world to stay away must be respected.



Uncontacted inhabitants of North Sentinel Island, known to outsiders as the Sentinelese, Andaman Islands. © Christian Caron — Creative Commons A-NC-SA

1.2 From Amazonia to the Pacific

“

And they are not the only uncontacted people in the Yanomami forest land. Other isolated peoples live further away, in the Erico region. They are like the Moxihatëtëa. Also, on the other bank of the Catrimani River, downstream, at the headwaters of the Rio Xeriuni, there are other isolated people. And also on a tributary of the Rio Aracá, in the middle. That's why we fight for them. We are very worried about what might happen to them. There are other uncontacted people in the forest near the Waimiri Atroari people and many others throughout the Amazon! They have lived like this for a long time and want to continue to do so! ... But the white people don't know this, because they don't understand the language of these people. White people just think, 'What are they doing here?'"

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, Brazil, at the United Nations, 2020

The vast majority — more than 95 percent — of these 196 uncontacted peoples live in the Amazon, in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. Almost two-thirds are in Brazil. But there are also uncontacted peoples living in the dry forest of the Chaco in Bolivia and Paraguay, on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands of India, in Indonesia and in West Papua.

While *Survival* discusses the broad geographical areas in which uncontacted peoples live, we do not share specific details about their locations — especially if this information is not widely known. The threat of contact attempts by some missionaries, influencers and other bad-faith or destructive actors is too great.

Beyond these 196 peoples, our researchers have gathered additional information about potentially more peoples and groups in Suriname and French Guiana in South America, and others in Asia, including in Malaysia and Thailand. *Survival* has also received multiple reports of Indigenous communities living without permanent outside contact in certain areas of Papua New Guinea; more research is needed to confirm their presence. Including these possible groups would bring the number to as many as 225 in total. Some anthropologists, meanwhile, have suggested that there may be some very isolated hunter gatherer peoples living in the forests of Central Africa, despite recent experiences of violence and civil war in these areas. But there is currently insufficient evidence to confirm or refute this.

The Brazilian Amazon is home to 124 uncontacted Indigenous peoples and groups living across a vast area of rainforest. Along with their immediate Indigenous neighbors, with whom many share territories, 88 of these uncontacted groups live in and care for 75 million hectares of rainforest recognized (to varying extents) as Indigenous land. At least nine uncontacted tribes in Brazil live in territories legally recognized exclusively as theirs, while others share territories with Indigenous peoples who maintain regular contact with non-Indigenous communities. But 36 uncontacted groups in Brazil live in territories which still have no status or protection as Indigenous land.

“

There are probably other isolated Indigenous people here in this land of ours. If there was a plane to fly over the whole area, we might find more. Maybe up near the Anavilhanas islands, along the river, we believe there may be some there because the forest is so dense, but we are not sure.”

Kinja (Waimiri Atroari) leaders, Brazil, 2019¹⁴

The densest concentration of uncontacted Indigenous peoples in the world is in the Yavari-Tapiche area around the border between Brazil and Peru, including the Javari Valley on the Brazilian side of the border and neighboring Indigenous reserves and national parks in Peru. This area of 162 square km is home to approximately 26 uncontacted groups and peoples.



There is current, credible evidence for at least 28 uncontacted peoples in Peru, 18 in Colombia, 13 in Bolivia, four in Venezuela, three in Ecuador, and one in Paraguay. As nomadic hunter gatherer peoples, many uncontacted peoples in South America travel across national borders — such as the Mashco Piro, Matis or Matsés between Peru and Brazil; the Tagaeri and Taromenane between Ecuador and Peru; and the Ayoreo between Bolivia and Paraguay.¹⁵ The uncontacted Ayoreo are the only known uncontacted Indigenous people in South America living outside the Amazon rainforest, in the Paraguayan and Bolivian Chaco.

“

It's important that people know that we are not the only humans on this Earth — the Kawahiva and other uncontacted tribes are out there, in their forests. We must protect their forest.”

Jair Candor, government protection officer monitoring uncontacted peoples' land, Brazil, 2018

*The yano (communal house) of the Moxihatëtëa, one of several uncontacted Yanomami groups. They were threatened by goldminers working illegally nearby.
© Guilherme Gnipper Trevisan/FUNAI/
Hutukara*

Two uncontacted peoples live on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands of India, in the eastern Indian Ocean. The Sentinelese, the world's most geographically isolated tribe, live alone on North Sentinel Island and firmly reject all contact attempts. The Shompen are hunter gatherers who live in the rainforest on Great Nicobar Island. While some are in contact with non-Shompen, most reject contact with outsiders. Some Shompen groups have suffered catastrophic population loss due to diseases brought by settlers from outside.¹⁶

West Papua is home to at least two, and potentially up to 10 uncontacted peoples or groups. Very little is known about them as West Papua is under military occupation, with foreign access strictly controlled by the Indonesian security forces.

The Maluku, Sulawesi and Sumatra islands of Indonesia are home to nomadic hunter gatherer peoples who have rejected contact for centuries. Survival believes there to be at least four separate uncontacted peoples or groups in Indonesia today.

The population of individual peoples or groups can range from just a few to several hundred people. The largest groups include the Hongana Manyawa in Indonesia, who number around 500 uncontacted people (out of a larger total population) and the approximately 750 uncontacted Mashco Piro in Peru. Other tribes or groups may only include a few survivors. There were seven Akuntsu living in the Brazilian Amazon when they were contacted in 1995. Survivors of decades of brutal attacks, there are now only three individuals left. Their genocide will likely soon be complete.

Dozens of Mashco Piro people appeared on a river bank in Peru in 2024, just a few miles from logging concessions. © Survival International





Note: The nature of Indigenous land recognition — and recognition specifically for uncontacted peoples — varies considerably between countries. For Brazil, we are using ‘full’ recognition to mean full demarcation, and ‘partial’ recognition to refer to the stages on the way to demarcation. In other countries, we are judging recognition on the basis of both legal status and enforcement. ‘Partial’ can mean some, insufficient recognition, or more robust recognition that covers only part of the territory. In almost all cases, including those of full recognition, improved protection and enforcement is still needed.



TESTIMONY

Mandeí Juma, Brazil

“The Juma were a very, very numerous people,” says Mandeí Juma. “We’re now down to only three of us because of the massacre — and also because white people have come into contact with uncontacted people. They can’t do that... If they do it, the Indigenous people will catch a disease and everyone will be killed. That’s what has been happening. There are fewer and fewer of us.”

The massacre Mandeí speaks of was the culmination of a long and brutal colonization of the Juma’s territory, once spanning 93,000 acres around the Purus river in the Brazilian Amazon. Invading colonizers brought violence, disease and displacement, ravaging the Juma population. Then, in 1964, gunmen sent by local colonists massacred the already depleted Juma people, killing at least 60 people and leaving only a handful of survivors.

“My father [Aruká] was one of the ones who survived the massacre,” says Mandeí. “Other Juma [survivors] included his father, my grandfather. He and my uncle were both shot twice but managed to survive.”

After this devastating attack, Aruká and his small group of survivors sought safety deeper in the forest. But violence was not the only threat. After years of trying, American missionaries from the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) made first contact with Aruká's group in 1967, exposing them to further danger.

"The Americans [missionaries] went to clear the land to build an airstrip inside the territory," says Mandeí. "They ended up bringing even more disease...which led to people dying. That's why my sister died."

The missionaries gave up their efforts to evangelize the reluctant Juma in the late 1970s. But the history of deadly forced contact, disease, violence and invasion of their territory had a lasting impact — even with the birth of Mandeí and her sisters Boreha and Maitá in the 1980s, they struggled to grow their community. The Brazilian authorities did not fully protect their land, despite knowing that they were present. In 1980, Aruká's group was located by a government agency, and from 1988 onwards they had somewhat regular contact with FUNAI (the Brazilian government Indigenous Affairs agency). In 1991, the group sought help for one of their members, a man named Karé, who had been fatally attacked by a jaguar. But instead of fulfilling their constitutional obligation to fully recognize and protect Juma land, FUNAI decided in 1998 to relocate the small group of remaining Juma — then just Aruká, Mandeí and her two sisters, her aunt Inté and her uncle Marimã — hundreds of miles away.

"The [FUNAI] people came to take us out of our village. They took us away [to the Uru Eu Wau Wau Territory, more than 500 km away] and we spent more than 15 years there. My aunt was already old. To take an old woman off her land, it's like you're ripping the person apart, ending their life. That's why she died.

She died there, my aunt — and my uncle, too. They took my father. But we later managed to bring him back to his land."

In 2013, the few Juma survivors returned to their territory. Aruká appointed Mandeí his successor as chief of the Juma, a role she later passed on to her sister. In 2021, Aruká, survivor of massacres and forced contact by missionaries, died of COVID-19. The last man of the Juma people, Aruká fought hard for his land and his people.

"That's how we survived. Then we were the only Juma survivors — me, my sister and my other sister. That's three people."

Mandeí and her sisters married Uru Eu Wau Wau men; but they all three keep the Juma identity alive, speaking the language and performing rituals. Although Juma identity has traditionally been passed down through fathers, Mandeí's daughter had a traditional Juma wedding, and some of her children, nieces and nephews use the name Juma.

Now, Mandeí works for FUNAI, monitoring the lands of uncontacted Indigenous people. Her unique knowledge gives her a keen insight into the territory and the traces that these peoples leave in the forest. She believes that the uncontacted people known as the people of Floresta Nacional de Balata-Tufari are also Juma, possibly other survivors of the 1964 massacre.

"I joined the monitoring work so that this wouldn't happen again, so that people wouldn't go in and massacre the uncontacted people. It's to protect them, so they don't end up like the Juma people. I like [this work], protecting nature and the people who are there, the uncontacted Indigenous people."

1.3 Rejecting contact

“

When I lived in the forest, I had a good life...Now if I meet one of the uncontacted Awá in the forest, I'll say, 'Don't leave! Stay in the forest. ... There's nothing in the outside for you,' I'd say.”

Wamaxué Awá, who was first contacted in 2009, Brazil, to Survival, 2011

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples live in areas well-suited to avoiding contact — all in forests, and some on islands. Many uncontacted peoples and groups may, nevertheless, have had some form of contact in the past, perhaps with neighboring Indigenous peoples, but also with those invading their lands. Their decision to reject contact can be seen as a survival strategy and as evidence of their desire to live in the way they choose, in the face of an ongoing process of colonization and its remembered and continuing dangers.



A recently contacted Awá couple and their newborn baby, photographed on a river bank. © Fiona Watson/Survival International

The land invasions and violations of rights which uncontacted Indigenous peoples experience today are part of an ongoing — often centuries-long — process of colonization and attempted colonization that may have in the past brought them into contact with rubber tappers, loggers, oil prospectors, cattle ranchers, missionaries, military forces, and other land grabbers.

In the Americas, both contacted and uncontacted Indigenous peoples are survivors of hundreds of years of brutal European colonization — from the original invasion to today's ongoing 'opening' of the Amazon. An estimated 90 percent of the Indigenous population of the Americas was wiped out within approximately 100 years of the start of the European invasion.¹⁷ In the Amazon — now home to 95 percent of uncontacted Indigenous peoples and groups — some protected themselves

from the initial impacts of the European invasion and improved their chances of survival by avoiding contact: remaining deep in the forest, retreating up Amazon headwaters, or adopting a nomadic way of life better suited to avoiding the invaders.

The western Amazon, encompassing the region around the borders between Brazil, Peru, and Colombia, has a large number of uncontacted peoples, including the Marahua, Yuri, Passé, the peoples of the Alto Rio Negro and peoples in the Javari Valley. Another brutal wave of colonization came to this area with the rubber boom in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when rubber barons enslaved and killed thousands. Many uncontacted peoples in the region today likely are descendants of Indigenous people who escaped those atrocities.

In parts of Asia and in the Pacific, many Indigenous peoples only had first contact with outsiders within the last 100 years, while some have stayed isolated by choice in their forested territories. The Hongana Manyawa and other uncontacted peoples in Indonesia resist contact and shun outsiders, while their lands are targeted by mining companies, missionaries, or government officials.

Contact has often been appallingly brutal in this region, too, as in the Indonesian state's comparatively recent colonization of West Papua. Since the 1960s, the military has led the "Indonesianization" of the country and its Indigenous peoples — deliberately replacing West Papuan Indigenous languages, cultures and livelihoods with those of Indonesia, while forcing compliance with the state. Even at the turn of the millennium, there were thought to be 40 or more uncontacted peoples in West Papua. Survival's research shows there is now credible evidence of at least two uncontacted peoples — though there may still be as many as 10.

The uncontacted peoples of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean have avoided contact, often by strongly defending their territories against invasion both from British colonists who occupied the islands in the 19th century, or, more recently, by the Indian government, settlers, and missionaries. This includes the Sentinelese, who live alone on their island and actively defend it against invaders.

“

Our uncontacted relatives, the Awá, live on this land too. They don't even want contact with us Tenetehar people, and we're their relatives. If they come into contact with us, they could get ill. ... We don't want that.”

Tainaky Tenetehar of the Guajajara Guardians, to Survival, 2019

Uncontacted peoples are determined to resist encroachment on their land, and remain out of contact in the face of what they know of outside society. This makes them highly unusual in an increasingly integrated world, but it is not a choice made in ignorance. They know at least something — and often quite a lot — about outside societies. They are rejecting the choice to join those societies. It is a rational decision, given all that can come with contact, as we explore in the following chapters.

What's in a name?

The names by which most Indigenous peoples refer to themselves collectively are generally a word in their language for something like “the people”, or perhaps “human beings”, or “true people”, or “friendly people” — something that may implicitly refer to everyone, or to “us” as opposed to “them”. But we can only know uncontacted tribes’ names for themselves if they are related to contacted peoples, or if some of them have sustained contact with outsiders.

This is how we know the name of the uncontacted Awá (“the people / humans”), who are one of many Tupi-Guarani-speaking peoples who use the term “awá” or “awaeté” in their name for themselves. The Ayoreo, or Ayoreode, (“true people”) live in Paraguay and Bolivia; some — including some of the Ayoreo Totobiegosode (meaning, roughly, “true people from where the wild pig was killed”) — are uncontacted.

There are 45,000 Yanomami (“human beings”) living in Brazil and Venezuela, known by this collective name, although they have many specific names for different groups. Among these, there are several uncontacted groups, including a large group known to other Yanomami as the Moxihatëtëa, or “the people of the penis tied up by two strings”, in contrast to the single penis string used by most Yanomami.

Overall, we probably know how only a minority of uncontacted peoples would refer to themselves. For the vast majority, we use names conferred by outsiders, whether other Indigenous peoples or colonizers.

Sometimes these names endure even after some contact. In Brazil, the people known as the Piripkura — meaning the “butterfly people” — were given this name by the Gavião, a neighboring Indigenous people, for the way they pass almost silently through the forest, always on the move. It is now known that they call themselves ‘Kawahiva’ (“people”) but since this is a name also used by other distantly related peoples, the name ‘Piripkura’ is still used.

At other times, names are replaced when their names for themselves become known. The Kayapó people had uncontacted neighbors whom they named ‘Kraniakarare’ (sometimes misspelled as Krenacore, Kreen-Akrore, or Krenhakore), “round cropped heads”, after their traditional hair styles. Having gained a reputation for being large — although a similar size to neighboring Indigenous peoples — others called them “Giants”. Since contact, they are known by their name for themselves, the Panará (“the people”).

The Ang (“we people”¹⁸), in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, were known prior to contact as the ‘Jarawa’, from the word for “stranger” or “the feared ones” in the language of the neighboring Great Andamanese. The Ang may not have known about this name for them until sustained contact was made in the late 1990s.

The Shompen, a nomadic people living in the forests of Great Nicobar Island, are also called Shom Pen or Shom Peng. It is likely these are British mispronunciations of what the Great Nicobarese call them: “Shamhap” which means “those who live in forests”. Most Shompen are uncontacted, and they are

divided into at least two large groups and many clans. We know that those on the east side of the island call themselves “Keyet”, while those on the west and in the interior call themselves “Kalay”, and that both groups refer to the other as “Buavela”.

Northern Shompen wear ear plugs, and the other Shompen call them “the ear-plug bearers”.

Some names conferred by outsiders are pejorative. The Hongana Manyawa (“people of the forest”) — whose name is known because some of them have been contacted — consider the name “Togutil”, used by many outsiders, to be offensive. One theory is that it comes from the word “gutili”, meaning “dirty skin”.

When there has never been any sustained contact with any members of an Indigenous people, and therefore no hint of what they might call themselves, peoples are often given a nickname referring to their geographical location or a feature of their land. The uncontacted people of Igarapé Ipiaçava in the Brazilian Amazon have been given this name in reference to a nearby stream. We use the name ‘Sentinelese’ to refer to the people living on the island which outsiders named ‘North Sentinel’; but no one knows what they call themselves. Their island is known by the neighboring Onge Indigenous people as “Chia daaKwokweyeh”.

Of course, the tables are often turned. Indigenous peoples have names for outsiders, given before contact when they were closely observing strangers on their land. The Kĩsêdjê from the Xingu region of Brazil, for example, called white people “big-skinned people”, in reference to the clothes that hung loosely on their bodies. The Korowai in West Papua called outsiders “laleo”, meaning “zombies”. The Ayoreo, meanwhile, call white people ‘coñone’, meaning “people who do things that do not make sense”.

1.4 Resilience under attack

“

The rainforest is our home, it’s where we live. The company has been destroying our rainforest and this is all that’s left. We will not give our land to anybody. This is the rainforest that our parents and ancestors have been living in. This place is ours. We will not let you take our land from us. Stop stealing it from us.”

Ngigoro, a formerly uncontacted Hongana Manyawa man with uncontacted relatives, Indonesia, to Survival, 2024

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples are uniquely self-sufficient, independent and resilient. Like many other Indigenous peoples, they have expert knowledge of their lands, which enables them to provide for themselves entirely from their environment. This is also the source of their resistance and resilience in face of the attacks against them.

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples are the most self-sufficient peoples on the planet. Their ability to provide for themselves, while respecting and caring for the environment on which they rely, outstrips the capabilities of most people by so far that comparison seems absurd.

Most people alive today — certainly in non-Indigenous, industrialized societies — would find it an immense and possibly insurmountable challenge to harvest and create everything they need for food, shelter, clothing, tools, medicine, etc. Yet this is the norm for uncontacted Indigenous people. And while daily life in industrialized societies almost inevitably causes some degree of environmental damage — through transportation, energy use, imported clothes or intensively farmed food — uncontacted Indigenous peoples have for generations stewarded and shaped some of the most biodiverse places on Earth.

Despite this self-sufficiency, uncontacted Indigenous peoples all over the world are under threat from land grabbers, extractive industries, criminal gangs, missionaries and adventure tourists. Uncontacted Indigenous peoples ask nothing but to be allowed to live in their own lands and forests in peace, but they are at risk of genocide due to the relentless exploitation by outsiders of their territories, their resources, their souls and their stories.

The struggle for autonomy and survival is common to all uncontacted Indigenous peoples. While they are amazingly resilient, they need our support in that struggle. They have the right to their land, and to determine whether and how much they have contact with others. It is our responsibility to respect those rights.

Their land and their choices about contact must be theirs alone.



Karapirú Awá, Brazil

“I was the only survivor of the family. They killed my mother, my brothers and sisters and my wife.”

For over a decade, Karapirú Awá lived in solitude and silence in the Brazilian Amazon. In the 1960s, Earth’s richest iron deposit was discovered near the territory inhabited by his people, the Awá of Maranhão state, Brazil. In the ‘70s, outsiders began to flood in, destroying his home and brutally massacring his people. The Awá were constantly on the move in flight. In 2000, he first told Survival International his story.

“At the time of the massacre [c. 1977], I hid in the forest and escaped from the white people. I lived, always managing to escape. I walked a long, long way, hiding in the forest. I was very hungry, and it was very hard to survive. I was shot [in the back] during the massacre. I suffered a great deal because I couldn’t put any medicine on the wound. I spent days wandering around in pain, with the lead in my back, bleeding. It was amazing that I escaped. It was thanks to Tupã [the creator].

“I spent a long time in the forest, hungry and being chased by ranchers. I was always running away, always alone. I had no family to help me, no one to talk to. I went deeper and deeper into the forest: I couldn’t tell you where I went.

“There are times when I don’t like to remember all that happened to me, that time I spent alone in the forest.”

Over the course of a decade, Karapiru walked over 400 miles alone across the Brazilian Amazon. In 1988, he met a farmer. Although they were unable to communicate, Karapiru chose to return with him to his village in west Bahia. News spread through the region of this “unknown” Indigenous man. FUNAI, Brazil’s Indigenous Affairs agency, brought various Indigenous people to meet him, but none could identify his language. Eventually, they brought a young man named Xiramukū.



Karapiru saw his entire family massacred by karai (white people). He escaped and lived on his own for 10 years before making contact with a farmer. Soon after, he was reunited with his son, who had survived the attack. © Survival International

Karapiru recognized him. Xiramukū was Awá — and he was Karapiru’s son, whom Karapiru believed had been murdered in the massacre roughly ten years before.

Reunited at last, Karapiru and Xiramukū moved to Tiracambu, an Awá village in the mountains of Maranhão. Karapiru remarried and had several children. Determined to see a safer, healthier future for his children, he often told his story.

“I feel good here with the other Awá. And I have found my son after many years. I hope the same things that happened to me won’t happen to my daughter. I hope she will grow up very healthy. I hope it won’t be like it was for me.”

In July 2021, at the age of 75, Karapiru Awá died of COVID-19. Though his life was marked by unimaginable tragedy, his warmth, resilience, and strength shone to the end. In an obituary in *The Guardian*, linguist Marina Magalhães described him as “the best a human can be”.



PART TWO: At the edge of survival

“

The real threats against uncontacted tribes' futures are genocidal violence, the invasion of their lands and theft of their natural resources, and prevailing racist attitudes.”

Open letter from 10 Indigenous organizations¹⁹ in Brazil, Paraguay and Peru, 2015

*Yanomami people on the Perimetral Norte (Northern Perimeter) highway, Brazil, 1976. This road was part of a project initiated by the military dictatorship of Brazil during the 1970s, to secure the northern borders of Brazil and to open up the area to colonization. It had a devastating impact on the Yanomami.
© Bruce Albert*

2. Dangers of contact: violence, disease and land theft

“

We can never forget that, when we are in the process of attracting these people [to make contact], what we are actually doing is forming the spearhead of a complex, cold and determined society... We are invading the lands they live on without being invited, without their agreement. We are introducing needs they have never had. We are destroying extremely rich forms of social organization. We are taking their peace and tranquility away from them. We are launching them into a different, cruel and hard world. Often, we are leading them to their death.”

Report of meeting of Brazilian experts on uncontacted peoples, 1987

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples are extraordinarily self-sufficient, impressively resilient, and able to both survive and thrive in isolation. But all are facing threats to their isolation, their land or both — threats to which they are uniquely vulnerable. Almost half of all uncontacted Indigenous groups are facing immediate dangers — of forced contact, violence, disease and land theft — that, if left unchecked, could destroy them within 10 years.

The details of invasions vary — from land seizure by huge oil companies and cattle ranchers to incursions by drug traffickers and missionaries. But they bring the same two threats — of forced contact and of land theft and destruction. Today, contact is most often forced onto uncontacted Indigenous peoples because their territories are being invaded by those stealing their land or resources. In cases when contact comes first, seizing or destruction of the land will usually soon follow. The dangers are thus closely linked — and both are devastating.

All uncontacted Indigenous peoples are under attack. A large majority — around three quarters — are facing multiple deadly dangers, and more than 90 uncontacted peoples or groups — almost half of the total — are facing immediate and severe threats that, if left unchecked, pose a serious risk of destroying them within the next 10 years. This includes 48 peoples or groups in Brazil alone.

This chapter explores how forced contact and land theft lead to destruction and death for uncontacted peoples. The following chapters explore in more detail the different types of invasions and contact that threaten them.

2.1 Forced contact, violence and disease

“

The first thing I remember was the plane above our village. It dropped machetes, axes and blankets. Then it came back another day and dropped more things. I remember we were making poison for hunting at the time. The plane disappeared and I had no idea who it was. Then FUNAI [government officials] arrived. They came up our trail and left us things — they hung up knives and pans. At first we were very frightened of the whites because they always want to kill us. So I ran into the forest. Later we went down to the FUNAI camp and that was our first contact... But we caught illnesses at the camp and then everyone rushed into the forest, which is our home. We would bathe in the river and then sit by the fire. Then we got pneumonia. A lot of people died then. Disease hit everyone and now we don't have shamans anymore.”

Bina Matis, Brazil, to Survival, 1996

“

What we are really doing is a crime. When I enter into contact with [Indigenous people], I know that I am forcing a community to take the first step on a road that will lead them to hunger, sickness, disintegration, quite often to slavery, the loss of their traditions and, in the end, death in complete misery that will come all too soon.”

Antonio Cotrim, FUNAI (Brazil's Indigenous affairs department), 1972



Raya, a Nahua man. More than half his people were wiped out after their land was opened up for oil exploration. © Johan Wildhagen/Survival International

Forced contact of uncontacted Indigenous people can be accompanied by violence, and always brings deadly exposure to disease, killing many people very quickly. Diseases common elsewhere are deadly to uncontacted peoples, who have no immunity to them. Communities are ravaged — even wiped out entirely — and survivors left devastated.

When isolated Indigenous people come into contact with others, it is almost invariably being forced upon them. If Indigenous people are uncontacted today, it is because they have decided to be so. Forcing contact on them violates their right to self-determination (see chapter 7), and is highly dangerous.

Some very few uncontacted peoples have initiated contact — like a group of Cinta Larga in the 1960s, or the group of nine Indigenous Pintupi people in Australia who first made contact with other Pintupi in 1984. Extreme care is still needed to protect their lands and limit disease.

Contact can still be forced, even when it is being initiated by the uncontacted people. Actively seeking out uncontacted Indigenous people — as some missionaries do — is forcing contact on them. But so is removing their choices — by destroying their territories for mines or ranches, or killing so many people that the survivors struggle to maintain their communities. If people are driven into contact because their rivers and hunting grounds are razed or polluted or their hunters have all been killed, that is no more voluntary than contact made at gunpoint. Contact must not be forced in any way.

“

My father was shot by a white man. All my brothers and sisters have died. I had two brothers and five sisters. They were killed by the white people or they died from karugwara [illnesses]. Before we knew the whites, it was better. Now all the game has gone.”

Murika Uru Eu Wau Wau, Brazil, to Survival, 1992

Violent contact is a persistent threat. When Survival International was founded in 1969, it was in response to horrific reports of Indigenous peoples in Brazil — many of them uncontacted — being gunned down, poisoned, tortured and their villages being bombed²⁰. There is still violence today, even if not on such a massive scale. In Indonesia, local militias regularly launch armed incursions into the uncontacted Hongana Manyawa’s forest to kill or kidnap people, announcing that they are “at war” with them²¹. In Peru, logging on Mashco Piro land has spurred violent clashes over the years, in which both Indigenous people and logging workers have been killed.

Even without weapons, forcing contact kills.

There is, inevitably, a lack of data about the health of uncontacted Indigenous people. But academic studies drawing on evidence of nomadic peoples driven (or forced) to settle, show clear patterns of the immensely harmful effects of this “brutal and radical”²² change. Independent, nomadic Indigenous peoples who live mostly by hunting and gathering — which describes the vast majority of uncontacted Indigenous peoples — are demonstrably healthier than those who have been

forcibly settled, in terms of food quality, lifestyle, vulnerability to disease, exposure to pollution and pathogens, and mental stressors.²³ While no people is free of disease, uncontacted Indigenous peoples are largely well-adapted to the parasites and germs to which they have historically been exposed — but not to those they encounter after contact. Their way of life limits the spread of infectious disease.²⁴ Hunter gatherers who live on their own land live, on average, longer than displaced hunter gatherers and impoverished urbanized peoples in the Global South²⁵ and spend a far greater proportion of their lives in good health.²⁶ That is, beyond the violence that often accompanies forced contact of Indigenous peoples, hunter gatherer peoples who have been settled typically fall into ill health and die sooner than they would if still living a nomadic life in the forest.²⁷



Pages from the Figueiredo report, commissioned by Brazil's Minister of the Interior in 1967, which exposed atrocities against Indigenous peoples in Brazil. Survival International was founded in response to this and other reports.

“

When we lived in the forest...we'd flee from one place to another, and one day we had to leave. Some of us died later on. My family stayed in the forest — my mother, my sister and others. They're there. I don't want them to die. But I don't want them to live as I live now. I'm sick and so is my partner. I'm really worried. He's weak now and can no longer go out to hunt and bring back food for our children.”

Joro Picanerai, Ayoreo woman, Paraguay, to Survival, 2022



Joro and her partner Chiccode. Joro was a child when her Ayoreo group was forced out of the forest in 2004. They had lived on the run for years, terrified of the ranchers clearing their land with bulldozers. © Teresa Mayo/Survival International

Infectious diseases typically ravage Indigenous peoples after contact.²⁸ Viruses that are widespread and easily survived elsewhere — among both non-Indigenous and contacted Indigenous peoples — can be deadly to uncontacted peoples. Horrific examples abound of Indigenous peoples around the world suffering appalling mass deaths from exposure to new diseases brought by outsiders²⁹. Contact in the Brazilian Amazon wiped out the vast majority of Indigenous people. Three quarters of the Indigenous peoples that survived contact — including those that came into contact with colonizers much more recently — lost more than 80 percent of their population.³⁰ Government research from Peru found that Indigenous populations need on average 150 years to ‘stabilize’ from the impact of disease after contact.³¹

“

Epidemics prove once again to be efficient instruments for creating empty lands for white occupation.”

*Professor Alcida Ramos, Brazil, 1979*³²

Between 1967 and 1975, an isolated Yanomami community in Brazil was totally wiped out by measles when a highway was built through their land. Three quarters of the Suruí Paiter, also in Brazil, were killed by measles and tuberculosis between 1980 and 1986, when colonizers and roadbuilders flooded their land a few years after initial contact.³³ The Nambikwara people in western Brazil lost more than 90 percent of their population, mostly to flu, malaria, measles and tuberculosis, after contact³⁴.

As a Nambikwara shaman explained to Survival, “My father said that before the whites came, we had hardly any illnesses... At the time of the road, everyone got flu and measles and everyone died.”

When the British first colonized India’s Andaman Islands in the 1850s, the Great Andamanese tribes were healthy peoples with an estimated population of almost 7,000. But they had little immunity to diseases introduced by the British, including measles, influenza and syphilis — the latter telling its own story of sexual abuse and exploitation. Devastating epidemics and violence followed. Since then, more than 99 percent of the Great Andamanese have been wiped out, with only around 50 people surviving today. The neighboring Onge people of Little Andaman Island lost 85 percent of their population to colonial violence and disease, and every single one of the Jangil people of Rutland Island died after contact.

“

Back then, white men came to our Waiāpi territory. We didn’t know what they had come to do on Waiāpi land, we Waiāpi didn’t know... Then we started to get ill. First came flu, then, I don’t know, fever, fever. The white men didn’t care for the Waiāpi health... Children died, adults died, women died... Nearly everyone from the entire Waiāpi tribe died — they so very nearly all died.”

Kasiripina Waiāpi (Wajāpi), who survived contact as a child, Brazil, to Survival, 2008

Medical advances and meticulous, well-intentioned planning have done little to lessen the catastrophic impacts of contact. As the impacts of contact became clear, some of the Brazilian government's 'contact' expeditions in the 1970s and 1980s would bring in specialist medical teams. Yet there was still widespread death from disease. A Brazilian government official reflected: "I learned what measles meant to recently contacted tribes — annihilation of their people."³⁵ As the world discovered with COVID-19, even the most advanced medical care cannot prevent fatal epidemics when the population has no prior immunity to viruses or other infectious diseases.

Sydney Possuelo, who established and led FUNAI's uncontacted tribes' department for many years, reflected on the contact of the Arara people in 1981, saying, "I believed it would be possible to make contact with no pain or deaths, I organized one of the best-equipped fronts that FUNAI ever had. I prepared everything... I set up a system with doctors and nurses. I stocked up with medicines to combat the epidemics which always follow. I had vehicles, a helicopter, radios and experienced personnel. 'I won't let a single Indian die,' I thought. And the contact came, the diseases arrived, the Indians died." In light of this, official government policy in Brazil changed to one of no-contact — but the danger of contact persists.

Contact, and all that comes with it, has a huge impact on mental as well as physical health. As elders die, knowledge and leadership are lost; as disease spreads, families are broken up; as land is taken over, livelihoods and sacred spaces are destroyed. Psychological trauma and forced dependency mean that many of those who survive the first onslaught are later killed by depression, alcoholism and drug use³⁶. The Xeta were the last Indigenous people to be contacted in Brazil's Paraná state, officially in 1954. Devastated by infectious

diseases and violence, survivors were described by witnesses as wandering around begging for rum. By 1999, only eight of them survived³⁷; one, Tikuein, described carrying around a mirror to look at and speak to himself, so that "I did not forget my past or my people"³⁸.

While most threats against uncontacted peoples target their land first, there are some that are directly focused on contact itself. 'Adventure-seeking' tourists or influencers are particularly prevalent in Asia and the Pacific (see chapter 5), and aggressive missionaries seeking to contact and convert uncontacted peoples are a threat for at least one in six of known uncontacted peoples or groups (see chapter 3). These efforts are far from benign. All contact kills. All countries must have no-contact policies in place.

“

It's ridiculous to say that contact will happen inevitably. Whether it happens one day or not, let it be on their terms. If they don't want to be left alone anymore, we'll respect that right, but we should never assume they don't want to be alone anymore. That's rubbish.”

Sydney Possuelo, former head of Brazilian government uncontacted Indigenous peoples' unit, to Survival, 2019

TESTIMONY

Alex Tinyú, Nukak people, Colombia

Alex Tinyú, an Indigenous Nukak man, was a child when his territory in south-east Colombia was invaded by missionaries, coca growers, settlers and armed groups in the late 1980s. After contact, more than half of their people died from disease and violence. In 2022, he told Survival his story.

“My people, the Nukak, lived in peace in our territory — hunting, fishing and gathering as we had done for generations. But everything changed with contact. Even as a child we heard the noises, the bulldozers...

“When the settlers arrived, they brought with them diseases we didn’t know about. Many Nukak got sick and were taken to hospitals, but they didn’t want the food they were given there. The rice, the onions: they didn’t want it, they threw up. They only wanted their own food: unsalted fish, game, fruits of the forest. When they returned to their land, many died.

“Death [from a flu epidemic] came quickly and without warning. Entire families disappeared. Children were left alone, without parents or grandparents to protect them. Some starved to death, others were eaten by jaguars or fell into rivers.

“The pain was unbearable. Many Nukak did not want to go on living and took barbasco, the poison we use for fishing, to end their suffering. In one territory alone, Chutnia, at least 12 entire communities died.

“But it was not only disease and abandonment that struck us. We also suffered violence. We were treated as if we were worthless. There was abuse, rape. Young men were captured, forced, and many girls were impregnated.

“Today we are still fighting for our survival. They took away our way of life, they took away our land and they are still threatening us. Why do they continue to humiliate us if they have already destroyed my people?

“The Nukak do not want our history to repeat itself. We want to live in peace, in our territory, with our people and our customs. We only ask for respect and justice.”



Alex Tinyú, a Nukak man. Most Nukak were forced out of their rainforest home in S.E. Colombia as their territory was taken over by armed groups and coca growers. © Arnau Blanch/Survival International

2.2 Land theft and destruction

“

Don't come into our forests and cut them down. This is where we collect food for our children and ourselves. We don't want outsiders in our forests.”

Shompen woman with uncontacted relatives, Great Nicobar Island, India 2019

“

I remember very little of when I was contacted because I was very young. We don't like the karai [non-Indigenous people] — they are very bad and have killed a lot of my relatives. I love the forest and I see the whites hunting everything and setting fire to everything. They hunt and kill everything. I think, man, why do they do this? Why do they set fire to everything and scare off all the game? Everything's gone. They will finish this place off and it's my place. This is our place and we are the owners.”

To'ó Awá, Brazil, to Survival, 2002

Almost every uncontacted people or group is facing danger because of theft and destruction of their land and resources — a continuing colonization. The perils come from extractive industries — which threaten more than 90 percent of uncontacted groups — as well as agribusiness and other land grabbers, and include both officially licensed and illegal activity. The invaders raze forests, pollute rivers, drive off game and destroy homes and sacred spaces. They bring malnutrition, poisoning, starvation and the destruction of communities — even before any immediate contact. These threats are everywhere, despite somewhat stronger legal protections in South America, and pose a huge risk to uncontacted peoples' survival.

Uncontacted peoples live on and rely on their land, which is the basis of their way of life and the source of their resilience. The escalating climate crisis and global biodiversity collapse are major risks to their forests and islands, and therefore their survival. While this is the case for everyone, it is arguably a particularly acute threat for peoples who depend directly on their land.

At the same time, almost every uncontacted group is also facing immediate, localized threats, from companies, governments or individuals targeting their forests or islands³⁹. Extractive industries — both legal and illegal — threaten the overwhelming majority of uncontacted Indigenous peoples, more than 90 percent of all peoples and groups, in all countries where they live. That is, activities like logging, mining, and

drilling for oil and gas are currently threatening almost every uncontacted Indigenous group on the planet. These activities tear up the forests in which uncontacted peoples live and on which they rely; destroy food sources and scare off game; poison rivers with chemicals and industrial or agricultural waste; and lay waste to medicinal plants and sacred spaces. These can be deadly by themselves — even more so because attacks on their land bring risks of contact, and thus exposure to violence and infectious disease. More than 90 peoples or groups face a severe and immediate threat to their continued existence. For all of these, the threat originates with assaults on their land and resources.

Logging is the most widespread danger, threatening at least 111 uncontacted peoples or groups across South America, Asia and the Pacific — almost two thirds of those for whom it is currently possible to assess the risks. It often goes alongside, or clears the way for, other threats such as mining — a threat to more than 40 percent of uncontacted peoples and groups — or oil and gas exploration, which is heavily concentrated in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Brazil. Agribusiness threatens almost a quarter of uncontacted groups — including sanctioned cattle ranching on Ayoreo land in Paraguay, illegal cattle ranching in Brazil, and oil palm plantations on the lands of uncontacted peoples in Asia and the Pacific. (See chapter 5.)

In South America, policies to recognize uncontacted Indigenous peoples' land rights, protect their territories, and respect their right to avoid contact are stronger than in Asia and the Pacific — on paper, at least. (See chapter 7.) But uncontacted peoples there still face the full range of threats. Often those threatening them are acting illegally or are under the radar — like drug traffickers, illegal miners and loggers, or missionaries. More than 60 uncontacted Indigenous peoples and groups in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Peru —

around a third of all those in the Amazon — are threatened by drug-trafficking criminal gangs that also often profit from illegal mining and logging. Dangers also persist because legal protections are not always enforced, especially when up against the might of extractive industries, agribusiness, or politically desirable 'development' projects. Politically endorsed projects like dams, roads and railways threaten at least 35 uncontacted groups in South America, including 28 in Brazil.

“

The white people killed my relatives there, and then there was no one left. Now there are other [uncontacted] relatives there. We don't have contact with them. We must let them live there.”

Irakatakwa Awá, Brazil, whose family was killed during contact, to Survival, 2023

The dangers are heightened in areas without official land protection — as in Colombia and Venezuela, where there are also serious threats from armed groups — and where anti-Indigenous politicians are working to weaken Indigenous peoples' legal rights and protections over their land in others — particularly in Brazil and Peru.



The fires lit by land-grabbers and ranchers every year to clear the Amazon forest frequently destroy the lands of both contacted and uncontacted Indigenous people. © INPE



As many as 40,000 illegal goldminers were at one time occupying Yanomami territory. Thousands continue to operate illegally, and the ongoing destruction, pollution, disease and violence continue to have a devastating impact on the Yanomami. © FUNAI



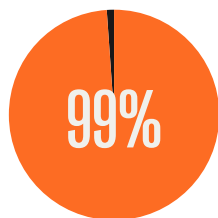
Gardens of manioc destroyed by settlers' fires in the Awá territory near the community of Juriti, Brazil. © Charlie Hamilton James



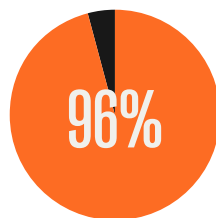
The huge Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP)'s nickel processing complex on Halmahera Island, Indonesia. Nickel mining is destroying uncontacted Hongana Manyawa people's forest. © Garry Lotulung



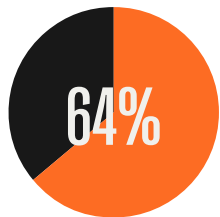
Uncontacted peoples and groups under threat



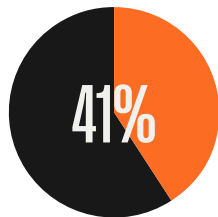
Uncontacted peoples and groups facing threats against their land



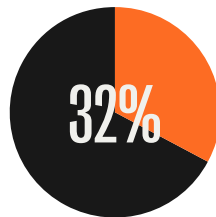
Uncontacted peoples and groups threatened by:
Profit-making activities



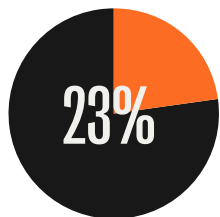
Uncontacted peoples and groups threatened by:
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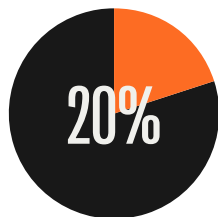
Uncontacted peoples and groups threatened by:
Mining



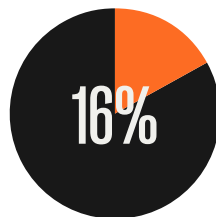
Uncontacted peoples and groups threatened by:
Drug trafficking



Uncontacted peoples and groups threatened by:
Agribusiness



Uncontacted peoples and groups threatened by:
Infrastructure & mega-projects



Uncontacted peoples and groups threatened by:
Missionaries

Whether a threat is a legal one or part of a criminal enterprise affects how it can be tackled. But it makes no difference to the uncontacted people whose lands are being invaded whether it is for illegal activity — like loggers invading the Awá territory in Brazil — or entirely supported by the state — like the logging concessions on Mashco Piro land in Peru.

The 89 uncontacted Indigenous peoples in South America who are most at risk include the uncontacted Ayoreo Totobiegosode in Paraguay, whose land has been taken by cattle ranchers; all of those in Colombia, at risk from violent armed groups and criminal gangs trafficking drugs; at least 16 peoples in Peru, most threatened by drug trafficking and logging, but also by oil and gas exploration; and 48 different groups in Brazil. In Brazil, this includes those in small territories surrounded by devastation like groups in the Kawahiva do Rio Pardo and Karipuna territories; many in the Javari Valley; most in the Uru Eu Wau Wau Territory and Alto Tapajós region; those around the Munduruku territory; and uncontacted Yanomami groups. The threats facing them are a mixture of roads and railways, illegal logging, mining and agribusiness — particularly cattle ranching.

In Asia and the Pacific, the weak regulatory framework for Indigenous peoples and lack of legal protection for or official recognition of uncontacted peoples leaves them deeply vulnerable to attacks on their territories. They face corporate threats — like mining and plantations; government-led threats, including resettlement; and surging numbers of tourists and influencers entering their territories and deliberately seeking interaction. On India's North Sentinel Island, the Sentinelese are threatened by missionaries, adventure influencers and illegal fishers who steal the food on which they rely. Just one individual forcing contact upon them — as an American tourist tried to do in March 2025 — could kill them all through

exposure to unfamiliar pathogens. Their closest neighboring peoples, the Bea and Jangil, have both already been wiped out.

The most severe and imminent threats in Asia and the Pacific are those faced by the Shompen on India's Great Nicobar Island — where a vast government-led infrastructure project is planned — and the Hongana Manyawa in Halmahera — where nickel is being mined on a massive scale. Without intervention, both of these peoples are at grave risk of being wiped out within the next decade.

Given that uncontacted Indigenous peoples everywhere are under attack from extractive and agricultural industries, supply chains are key to efforts to protect their rights. All industries must ensure that no materials are sourced from uncontacted peoples' territories.

Around the world, uncontacted peoples are being driven to death and destruction in pursuit of profit, and to fuel consumption-based industries. Companies and criminals seeking to make money from metals and minerals for phones and watches, leather for luxury car seats, timber for furniture, gas for power stations, or drugs and TikTok reels for entertainment are invading and often destroying uncontacted peoples' lands. Extractive industries, in particular, remain a grave threat for almost all uncontacted peoples. Along with effective land-protection and no-contact policies, there must also be laws and standards about raw material extraction. It is crucial for the survival of uncontacted peoples.



The impact of nickel mining on the Hongana Manyawa's forest. Their territory is now scarred by dozens of such mining pits. © Eramet



CASE STUDY

Ngu Surira, Cinta Larga people, Brazil

Ngu Surira experienced the catastrophes of contact twice.

As a young woman, Ngu Surira was raising her two small sons with her husband in a village in the rainforest of what is now Aripuanã Indigenous Territory in Mato Grosso, Brazil. Their people, the Cinta Larga, were aware of and hostile to the rubber tappers and mineral prospectors increasingly encroaching on their territory; some other Cinta Larga groups had been brutally attacked and massacred by these colonizers. But Ngu Surira's community had no contact with non-Indigenous people until a day in the dry season of 1973, when four Cinta Larga men went to investigate a strange object that they could see and hear flying overhead.

They followed the sound of the plane to Aripuanã, a town built by white settlers in the preceding decades. The Cinta Larga men returned to their village and described what they'd seen: strange, hairy people, with metal tools, pans and knives, who spoke an unfamiliar language. Intrigued, a larger group of

Cinta Larga, including Ngu Surira's husband, decided to go and investigate, setting up a temporary camp across the river from the white people's town. They did not know the devastation that awaited them.

Many who had traveled immediately got sick and died — 38 out of a total of 69 died from disease, including Ngu Surira's husband. The survivors brought back infection to their Cinta Larga village, which killed many more people.

Ngu Surira's community was not alone in experiencing such devastation at this time — an estimated 80 percent of the Cinta Larga people died during the 1970s, from infections like flu as well as violent attacks by and clashes with colonizers. "Flu started to roll out among everyone," a Cinta Larga man named Pio told Survival in 2004. "The flu lasted three years. You could get better, travel to another village and then pass it on. So the flu migrated for a long time. ... The flu lasted several years and so many people died."

Ngu Surira ended up completely alone with her boys. Moving deeper into the forest, she set up a home, reopened old gardens, and taught herself to hunt with a bow and arrow. With her husband and community gone, she raised her sons independently, the three of them living alone for more than two decades.

Then, 25 years after this first devastating contact, came another encounter. Ngu Surira and her sons heard the sound of engines invading their forest. Her sons were up a tree, inspecting harpy eagle chicks in a nest. "When they heard the roar of the bulldozers, they jumped out of the tree and ran up to the loggers shouting, 'Be quiet. You are disturbing our baby harpy eagles!'" The loggers nearly ran us over in our home. They were working fast, making roads into the forest to fell the trees."

Upon hearing of this renewed contact, the Brazilian Indigenous Affairs agency (FUNAI) came to visit the small Cinta Larga family, persuading them to move to a Cinta Larga village that was home to some of Ngu Surira's relatives from before her marriage.

But infectious disease took its toll again. Quickly growing sick with flu, Ngu Surira's youngest son, who had survived unimaginable trauma, succumbed to the illness — another victim of contact among the thousands of Cinta Larga killed by those who invaded their forest.

→

Tupá Matis, near the Itui river in the Javari Valley, Brazil. The Matis were devastated by western diseases after they were first contacted in the 1970s — over half of them died in the year following contact. Their numbers have risen from a low of 87 to around 500 today, but local Indigenous spokespeople say that the Brazilian government is not doing enough to protect their health. © Fiona Watson/Survival International

3. 'For their own good': salvation and integration

“

My children died. My mother died. My husband died. My brothers, my sisters, my aunts and uncles. I saw the bones sticking out of their rotting corpses inside the longhouse. We were too weak to bury them. I was left alone with my two baby brothers. All my family died, and all we got in return were a few machetes.”

A Matis woman, Brazil, whose people were almost wiped out in the years after contact by Brazilian authorities, to anthropologist Philippe Erikson, 1990s



Contact has long been forced on uncontacted peoples supposedly for ‘their own good’ — either to convert them to dominant religions or assimilate them to dominant society. Such efforts are not just racist and colonial, and violations of uncontacted peoples’ rights; they also bring death and devastation, and open the way for land theft.

Throughout centuries of conquest and contact, two justifications are consistently offered to argue that forcing contact onto uncontacted tribes is in their own interest. Both are rooted in racism and supremacist ideology, in stereotypes of uncontacted peoples as primitive, ‘heathen’, ignorant or doomed. The first supposed justification is that a new religion will ‘save their souls’. The second is that integrating them into national society will save their lives and bring them ‘progress’.

A 19th-century British official in the Andaman Islands described British colonization, which wiped out most of the Indigenous population, as “the foundation stone for civilizing a people hitherto living in a perfectly barbarous state”.⁴⁰ One hundred and fifty years of history has not erased such views: Jair Bolsonaro, while president of Brazil in 2020, stated that Indigenous people were “evolving” and “more and more are human beings like us”, and that they should therefore “integrate”⁴¹. Meanwhile, missionaries who seek to evangelize Indigenous peoples congratulate themselves for efforts they claim are bringing “light to their darkness”⁴².

Cloaked in claims about ‘civilization’ or ‘salvation’, these racist views echo centuries-old arguments for colonization, like the ‘Doctrine of Discovery’ promoted by the Catholic church

from the 15th century CE, justifying Christian colonization and violence against Indigenous peoples by stating that any lands not inhabited by Christians were available to be ‘discovered’ and claimed⁴³. The impact for uncontacted Indigenous peoples is devastating.

3.1 Missionaries: death for ‘salvation’

“

We remind you that we, the Baihuaeri of Bameno, are a recently contacted Indigenous people, and we have suffered a lot from contact driven by evangelical missionaries like you and from oil companies. We do not want that history to repeat itself. ... Let the uncontacted Waorani live in peace and tranquility according to their own will.”

Open letter from Baihuaeri group of Waorani people, Ecuador; to a missionary trying to contact the Taromenane people (an uncontacted people closely related to the Waorani), 2025

“

[Our land is being invaded by] missionaries ... who see uncontacted indigenous peoples as prizes rather than human beings with their own rich worldview and culture.”

Wino Këyashëni, also known as Beto Marubo, an Indigenous leader in the Javari Valley in Brazil, where many uncontacted peoples live, 2020⁴⁴

Evangelizing missionaries targeting uncontacted peoples have been responsible for countless deaths, primarily through exposure to disease. And they continue to be a threat — at least one in six uncontacted peoples today are threatened by missionaries making active attempts to contact and convert uncontacted peoples to Christianity, and in some places to Islam. They persist in spite of Indigenous peoples’ wishes — and despite the clear risk of killing them. Missionary efforts to contact and convert uncontacted peoples are often a prelude to companies or governments taking over their land.

While there are many responsible religious or missionary organizations that are working hard to support Indigenous peoples’ rights without contacting people⁴⁵, others act recklessly in pursuit of their mission, so convinced of their religious superiority that they are willing to risk killing uncontacted people to impose their views.

Several Christian missionary organizations, many originating in the US, have as their core aim to convert every people, or to translate the Bible into every language — whether they are in contact with outsiders or not. Some set a target date, such as 2033⁴⁶, for this so-called “Great Commission”. Such organizations are often particularly obsessed with areas with the highest concentration of uncontacted peoples, including the Javari Valley in the Amazon and the island of New Guinea⁴⁷. A US organization that encourages students to become missionaries calculates that \$1.32 billion⁴⁸ is spent annually on efforts to “reach the unreached”, including uncontacted peoples. Even a fraction of that spent on isolated Indigenous peoples spells devastation. Missionary organizations targeting the “unreached” are tax-exempt organizations with collective income in the hundreds of millions⁴⁹. They actively fundraise for high-tech equipment that will enable missions to uncontacted peoples, including for mapping⁵⁰, planes⁵¹, helicopters⁵² and boats⁵³. These efforts are an ongoing threat. In April 2025, Survival received an urgent warning via the recently contacted Baihuaeri group of Waorani people that an American missionary named Karen Duffy was openly attempting to contact the uncontacted Taromenane people in Ecuador.

Evangelical Christian missionary organization Ethnos360 is one of the most notorious. Previously known as the New Tribes Mission (NTM) — a name by which it is still known in some countries⁵⁴ — the founders declared, “By unflinching determination we hazard our lives and gamble all for Christ

until we have reached the last tribe regardless of where that tribe might be”⁵⁵. Their website states the “vision for our ministry when we were founded in 1942 ... is our mission today.”⁵⁶ The explicit targeting of every tribe, and the willingness to die in pursuit of conversion are particularly dangerous, encouraging missionaries to enter the territories of uncontacted Indigenous peoples who have made clear, with every means at their disposal, their desire to resist contact with outsiders and to be left alone. In 2022, Ethnos360 reported spending \$74m⁵⁷ on their mission to “evangelize unreached people groups”, including uncontacted Indigenous peoples.

“

It’s a total disaster. These guys [missionaries] couldn’t care less about the Indigenous people, they just want their souls...They’ll literally kill them, and the few that survive, their culture will be destroyed... It’s genocide.”

*Brazilian government expert José Carlos Meirelles on missionary contact among uncontacted peoples, 2020*⁵⁸

Their determination is undiminished by the genocidal potential of their missions. When an NTM missionary family brought measles to an isolated Yanomami community in 1967, it sparked an epidemic in which 165 Yanomami became infected and 17 died. The missionaries’ zeal was not dampened. One noted, “It was hard to realize that many of our friends had passed on to eternity without knowing Christ. Yet, we know that God never makes a mistake.”⁵⁹ Even today, the racism and contempt for Indigenous beliefs is not veiled, even thinly.

On Ethnos360’s website today are repeated descriptions of its work as not just bringing “light” but even of “moving against the fortresses of Satan”. Another US missionary organization describes the Yanomami as “one of the most primitive people groups in the world” and describes their religion and cosmology as “demonic”⁶⁰.

“

During this new [measles] epidemic, the missionaries did not give up on talking to us about [their God]. On the contrary, they prevented the shamans who were still able-bodied from treating us! They would repeat to them: “Do not call down your spirits who belong to Satanasi! ... Those who will die will go back to live with [God]. They will be happy there!”

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, Brazil, on NTM missionaries during a deadly measles epidemic among the Yanomami, 2010

Many missionaries draw their data from the Joshua Project, which describes itself as “a research initiative seeking to identify the ethnic people groups of the world with the fewest followers of Jesus”. Its database includes the Mashco Piro and Sentinelese, uncontacted peoples in the Amazon and the Indian Ocean respectively. The Joshua Project describes their information as a “destination map” to direct missionaries towards “unknown and hidden” peoples, in order to “prioritize” mission efforts.

For uncontacted peoples, such efforts are almost certain to kill.

While huge and well-resourced organizations lead the charge, lone missionaries sometimes follow their clear lead. In 2018, the world was gripped by the story of young US missionary John Allen Chau, who was killed after landing on North Sentinel Island in the Indian Ocean, home of the Indigenous people known to outsiders as the Sentinelese. He targeted the Sentinelese after learning of them through the Joshua Project⁶¹. The most isolated tribe in the world, they live on their own island and have clearly expressed determination to keep outsiders at bay — their use of arrows to protect themselves was very well known. Yet John Allen Chau was so determined to convert them to Christianity that he invaded their territory, despite the obvious risks both to himself and to the Sentinelese.

Writing in his diary just before he died, Chau makes his motivations clear, “Lord, is this island Satan’s last stronghold where none have heard or even had the chance to hear your name?” Despite his doubts, he stated his willingness to die for what he perceived as his God’s will: “I think I could be more useful alive . . . but to you, God, I give all the glory of whatever happens”.⁶² While many spoke out against his suicidal — and potentially homicidal — recklessness, others see him as a martyr and “hero”.⁶³ In 2025, the US-based “Voice of the Martyrs” organization is still publicizing its call for the Sentinelese to “be reached with the gospel message by someone willing to follow in John’s footsteps”⁶⁴.

Homicidal recklessness often features in evangelical efforts. In early 2020, as COVID-19 spread across Brazil and worldwide, Ethnos360 announced it bought a helicopter to access uncontacted peoples in the dense forest of the Javari Valley Indigenous Territory⁶⁵. This area, in the western Brazilian Amazon, is home to the highest concentration of uncontacted peoples anywhere in the world and has been described as



“But if a helicopter is needed to reach someone who is lost, then... God will provide one!” New Tribes Mission (now Ethnos360). © Ethnos360

“one of the most alluring places for evangelists”⁶⁶. Shortly afterwards, Marubo and Matsés Indigenous leaders in Brazil alerted the authorities that an American missionary from Frontier International Missions was attempting to contact and convert uncontacted Indigenous people in the Javari Valley — the third time this missionary was investigated for such efforts⁶⁷. A lawsuit against NTM-Brazil in the Javari Valley resulted in a ruling that the missionaries were a threat to uncontacted people. These evangelical missionaries were clearly undeterred by the immense threat of bringing a deadly new disease — COVID-19 — to people who had no immunity to it, nor to other diseases that are common elsewhere.

Today, aggressive evangelizing missionaries are a risk to more than one in six of all uncontacted Indigenous peoples. Most uncontacted peoples in Asia and a number in South America — including all those in Brazil’s Javari Valley and Deni Indigenous Territory — are at risk.

It is not only Christian missionaries who bring these dangers to uncontacted Indigenous peoples. Muslim groups have been targeting the Hongana Manyawa people on the forested island of Halmahera, in Indonesia, and while most of their known efforts have focused on contacted Hongana Manyawa — including taking children away to religious residential schools and racist claims to be making these “tarzans”⁶⁸ “purer and tidier”⁶⁹ — their interest is likely to also encompass the several hundred uncontacted Hongana Manyawa people.

The missionaries themselves are driven by zealotry. But some governments allow missionaries to enter the territories of uncontacted peoples as a convenient means to clear them from their land. The book *Is God An American?* — about American missionary and Bible-translation organization the Summer Institute of Linguistics (now known as SIL Global) — describes SIL missionaries’ work among the Cuiva people in Colombia in the 1970s, stating they “play an active and essential role in a process which can only be to the advantage of settlers and other foreign invaders. Their intervention is [a] deliberate effort to limit the Cuiva to a minimum space and get them to accept this as the irreversible outcome of history. Christian missionaries have been performing this colonial task for centuries and the SIL is certainly no different.”⁷⁰ In 2025, a former contractor for a company operating on uncontacted peoples’ land commented privately to Survival that if the company were “smart”, they would get missionaries to convert the uncontacted people and thus “sort it out” for the company to exploit their land.

This confluence of missionary, political and commercial interests was on clear display during the regime of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. He took office in 2019 — after publicly lamenting that Brazil’s Indigenous peoples had not yet been “exterminated”⁷¹ — and rapidly implemented aggressive policies designed to open up Indigenous land for

agribusiness and extractive industries⁷². A year into his term, he appointed Ricardo Lopes Dias, a former NTM missionary, to head the uncontacted and recently contacted peoples department at Brazil’s Indigenous Affairs agency (FUNAI). Lopes Dias’ position gave him immediate access to all the information FUNAI had originally gathered in order to protect uncontacted peoples. Missionaries who focus on reaching uncontacted peoples rejoiced⁷³. After much campaigning by Indigenous people, Survival, and others, the appointment was overturned. But it illustrates how missionary zeal can be a useful tool for more overtly political ends — and vice versa. The political and commercial interests behind forcing contact are examined further in the following chapters.



CASE STUDY

The Zo'é people, Brazil

“

Before, when there were no white people, the Zo'é didn't suffer from sickness...But once we had had contact with white people, we got flu. It is true, the white man gave the flu to the Zo'é and it killed many, many Zo'é...There used to be many Zo'é here, but only a few survived.”

Jirusihu, a Zo'é man, Brazil, to Survival, 2008

From the 1980s on, missionaries from the evangelical Christian organization New Tribes Mission (NTM) invaded the land of the Indigenous Zo'é people of northern Brazil. The result was death and devastation.

The Zo'é had been fleeing and avoiding contact — with commercial hunters, nut collectors, gold panners and mineral prospectors — for many years. The missionaries from New Tribes Mission (now also known as Ethnos360) were not deterred. After hearing about the Zo'é in 1982, they began stalking them in their own land, deliberately driving them into deadly contact. NTM repeatedly invaded Zo'é territory, dropped ‘gifts’ from a plane, and traced Zo'é hunting trails, at one point making what they called a “tense and brief” contact with a small group. In 1987 — without FUNAI, (the Brazilian Indigenous Affairs agency) knowing about it, and despite Brazil's new ‘no-contact’ policy for uncontacted peoples — the missionaries built a base and airstrip on the edge of the Zo'é territory. The consequences were catastrophic.

The Zo'é have lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle in the forests of northern Brazil for centuries, in a society built on equality and consensus. They live in communal homes with palm-thatched roofs and sleep in hammocks woven from Brazil nutshell fibers. They cultivate fruits, vegetables and cotton in their large gardens. They mark births, deaths and other momentous occasions with rituals handed down from their ancestors. NTM saw them as targets for conversion.

From their base and airstrip, the missionaries launched expeditions to Zo'e communities. The Zo'é responded with hostility, and watched from a distance. (A Zo'é hunter later also reported how amused they were by the missionaries' poor hunting technique.) Undeterred by this and by warnings from Brazilian authorities not to move into Indigenous villages, the NTM missionaries set out to lure Zo'é people to their base, bribing them — and building dependency — with prized tools like machetes, knives, pans and fishing tackle. They gradually convinced more and more Zo'é people to settle near the missionary base.



The impact was immediately devastating. Epidemics of flu and malaria — to which the Zo'é had no previous exposure and no immunity — raged through the community. By 1988, the year after the missionary base was built, a quarter of the Zo'é people had died.

FUNAI responded by expelling NTM from the Zo'é territory in 1991. But the missionaries stayed at their base on the edge of the territory, constantly trying new means to reach the Zo'é: returning to forest communities; using pastors evangelized from neighboring Indigenous peoples; and even trying to smuggle in a missionary disguised as a university researcher. Some 96 Zo'é, drawn out to the base, were forced to work as nut collectors in what local courts later ruled were slave-like conditions. In 2011, another devastating malaria epidemic struck the Zo'é community. In 2012, Brazil's Supreme Court finally ruled that the NTM must withdraw entirely from the area.

Tawy Zo'é carries his father Wahu Zo'é to get his first Covid vaccine. Tawy carried Wahu for 6 hours through the forest, over hills and streams to the health clinic. The Zo'é didn't want outsiders coming deep into their territory, so agreed the location of the health clinic with local health officials. © Erik Jennings

3.2 Integration: death for ‘progress’

“

It would be totally unfair to leave [the Ang] in a beastly condition forever ... They also have to enjoy the benefits of development.”

V. Kishore Chandra Deo, Minister of Tribal Affairs, India, 2012

“

You napëpë [non-Indigenous people] talk about what you call “development” and tell us to become the same as you. But we know that this brings only disease and death. The forest is our life and we need it.”

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, Brazil, 2007

Contact with uncontacted peoples is also justified via the racist, colonialist claim that settlement and integration represent “progress”. Indigenous peoples themselves, including Indigenous people in initial contact, as well as experts, reject the idea that imposing contact is in the interests of uncontacted people. Yet this view lingers particularly in Asia and the Pacific, where it infects government policies and exposes uncontacted peoples to forced contact — both a violation of rights and a deadly danger.

The secular argument that forced contact is for Indigenous peoples’ own good rests on a persistent stereotype of uncontacted peoples, and hunter gatherer peoples generally, as poor and backward — even as ‘stone-age’ or ‘Neolithic’ — and as doomed to die out. In this context, government settlement or development schemes are framed as benevolent solutions to ‘uplift’ or even save them. This is a barely repackaged version of the longstanding colonizer claim to be bringing civilization to uncivilized peoples.

Hunter gatherer societies — uncontacted or otherwise — are not stuck in a stage of human development, but rather are pursuing a self-sufficient, ecologically attuned way of life. It may be radically different from industrialized society, but they have the right to live as they choose, and to dismiss it as Neolithic is both ignorant and racist.

Indigenous peoples themselves — including people who previously lived in uncontacted communities — push back strongly against the idea that this is progress for their own

good, arguing against the idea of ‘development’ as framed by outsiders. Most non-Indigenous experts and anthropologists agree, arguing against imposing on uncontacted people what one anthropologist working in Brazil described to Survival as “the hideous cancer which we ironically call civilization”.⁷⁴

Yet there is a minority view among a few anthropologists that uncontacted peoples need contact. In 2015, anthropologists Robert Walker and Kim Hill published a reckless editorial in the journal *Science*⁷⁵, arguing that forced contact is the responsible, “humane” and “ethical” strategy and that contact is ultimately in uncontacted peoples’ interest. This paternalistic opinion denies uncontacted peoples’ right to choose their own way of life. It also dangerously ignores the devastating impacts of contact. As demonstrated by decades of government experience with contact in Brazil, even extensively planned and prepared medical care is not enough to counter the effects of introduced diseases, nor the devastation caused by the land theft and dispossession that inevitably follows. As many Indigenous people tell Survival, outsiders’ health clinics fail to cure them of illnesses they had not encountered before contact. Hill and Walker hypothesized a “rebound” from what they refer to as “population crashes” — which actually means huge numbers of people dying needlessly because of what outsiders impose on them against their clear wishes. As for a ‘rebound’, Peruvian government research shows that recently contacted peoples need up to 150 years to “stabilize their response” to newly introduced diseases⁷⁶.

In South America, official and mainstream public opinion has shifted over time, and there is no longer a universal assumption that uncontacted peoples ‘need’ integration, or would benefit from it. This is codified in no-contact policies — enacted in Brazil in 1987 and in Peru, and then Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Paraguay in the 1990s — and an end

to the devastating forced contact missions that the Brazilian government regularly led up until the 1980s. Disdain for uncontacted peoples’ rights and way of life is still evident in the willingness to trample over them for projects that are seen as strategically important, or are simply lucrative (as set out in chapters 4 and 5) and in the attacks of some politicians on Indigenous rights. But in response to the growth of Indigenous voices and pro-Indigenous views in society, there are not currently official efforts to make contact for uncontacted peoples’ ‘own good’.

In Asia and the Pacific, however, many politicians and officials continue to openly espouse dangerous views about uncontacted peoples’ ‘backwardness’ and the desirability of contact, allowing companies and other private actors to operate with impunity — all with deadly implications.

In India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands — and despite policies that exist on paper — bringing “civilization” and “progress” to uncontacted tribes has always been presented as a major reason for attempting contact. The evidence against this position should be overwhelming — the apparent continued health of the uncontacted Sentinelese, for example, contrasts with the death of 99 percent of the neighboring Great Andamanese, and the continued dependency of the survivors, since contact was forced on them in the late 1700s and colonization from 1850 onwards.

Yet ‘civilizing’ efforts have continued, including bizarre plans⁷⁷, launched in the early 1990s but not actually enacted, to teach the Ang (formerly known as the Jarawa) agriculture and to disperse seeds in their forest by dropping them out of helicopters. In 1999, soon after the Ang began sporadic contact with settlers on the edge of their territory, the Indian government planned to forcibly settle the entire tribe, with the Minister of Tribal Affairs speaking in 2003 of plans to “reform the tribals and assimilate them with the mainstream” because

“it is not right to leave them as is”. Thanks to a campaign by Survival International and local organizations, the government had, by 2004, abandoned this plan and begun to recognize the Ang’s rights to stay in their territories and live as they wish. But even in 2010, the member of parliament for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands described the Ang as being in “a primitive stage of development” and needing to be brought “up to the basic mainstream characteristics”, while in 2012, the Minister of Tribal Affairs described them as living in a “beastly” condition.

In Indonesia, the government’s Social Affairs Ministry has a “Remote Indigenous People’s Program” (KAT). But, unlike its nominal counterpart in Brazil, it still operates on the basis that contact and assimilation of uncontacted peoples is in everyone’s interest. From the 1960s to the 1980s, KAT worked to forcibly contact and settle the entire Hongana Manyawa tribe, whom they described as “culturally backward”. It succeeded in evicting many from their ancestral rainforest, thereby exposing them to deadly diseases which caused widespread suffering and death. There are no records of how many people died in total, but in one small resettlement area of fewer than a couple of hundred people, around 50 to 60 people are reported to have died in just two months⁷⁸. The surviving Hongana Manyawa refer to this time as “the plague”. Yet in 2015, a local government representative called for similar settlement attempts, describing the Hongana Manyawa’s life in the forest as being “of the stone age”, saying they instead needed “a decent life”.⁷⁹

Sometimes, the security forces are involved. In 2018, the Indonesian military announced it had resettled the entire Mausu Ane tribe, a nomadic hunter gatherer people living in the interior forests of Seram, South Maluku, many of whom were recently contacted or possibly uncontacted. A military colonel claimed that this helped the Mausu Ane by “bringing in aid, teaching them about how to be clean, how to brush their teeth, how to wash”.⁸⁰

Uncontacted tribes do not need others’ ideas of ‘progress’ imposed on them — especially if they come through brutal processes of contact, forced assimilation and settlement. By actively choosing to stay isolated, uncontacted peoples exercise their self-determination and develop their societies as they choose. Denying them this choice is a violation of their rights, and can never be justified by colonial assumptions of knowing what’s best.



Indonesia’s security forces and local people have mounted punitive expeditions into the forest in search of uncontacted Hongana Manyawa people.



CASE STUDY

Forced assimilation of Andaman peoples, India

The Indigenous peoples of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have long been the targets of government attempts — British and then Indian — to forcibly assimilate them. These efforts have had a horrific impact, causing death and trauma on a massive scale.

The most devastating attempts at assimilation were in the 1860s. The British set up “Andaman Homes” to house their Great Andamanese “hostages” (then 10 distinct tribes numbering up to 7,000 people but reduced to only around 50 individuals today). This brutal tactic was supposed to “civilize” the Great Andamanese, whom the British colonists, with no apparent sense of the irony, referred to as “savage” and “murderous”. Disease and abuse killed hundreds in the homes — of 150 babies born there, none survived beyond the age of 2.

By 1970, barely more than 20 Great Andamanese people survived. They were moved to the tiny Strait Island by the Indian authorities, where they became dependent on the

government for everything. They still suffer from high rates of alcoholism and tuberculosis. The past devastation and widespread evidence of continuing trauma — including the death by suicide of a young Great Andamanese man in 2023 — should act as a warning to the Indian government not to destroy the autonomy and violate the rights of other Indigenous peoples in the Islands, including the uncontacted Shompen (see chapter 4).

The Andaman government’s “Master Plan 1991–2021” drew up a strategy to “acculturate” the surviving Indigenous peoples of the Andamans. Although the process was intended to be gradual, the plans are fiercely prescriptive. There are proposals for what clothing the Ang (formerly known as the Jarawa) should wear: “loose half-pants and bush suit for men and cotton loose midi for women” and in the second phase, starting in 2020, it was envisaged that the Ang would be settled in two villages with an economy based on fishing, with hunting and gathering as their “sport”.

Fortunately, in 2001 following a major campaign from Survival and local organizations, the Indian courts ordered a temporary halt to these plans to forcibly settle the Ang. In 2004, the new government policy was announced, calling for “maximum autonomy to the Jarawa with minimum and regulated intervention” and for them “to develop according to their own genius.” Although the situation is far from perfect, the Ang continue to be self-sufficient hunter gatherers with very limited contact with outsiders.

However, the threat of forced assimilation remains. The Islands’ only MP continues to lobby for the Ang to be “mainstreamed”. In 2010, he demanded, “quick and drastic steps be taken to bring the Jarawa up to the basic mainstream characteristics”, wanting the children to be “weaned away from the tribe” and

sent to schools where they could be “quickly trained in personal hygiene [and] use of clothes.”

In 2024 he requested money from the government because the Islands are “home to most primitive tribal of the world [sic]” who need programs for their “development”. Meanwhile, the mega-development project planned for the Shompen’s island brings a scale of genocidal threat not seen since the time of the Andaman Homes. (See chapter 4.)

3.3 For whose good?

Claims that forced contact is for their own good — whether for religious purposes or to assimilate uncontacted peoples into mainstream society — ring hollow. They deny rights, lead to devastation, and serve as a front for the theft of uncontacted peoples’ land and resources.

Both religious conversion missions and other efforts to contact and assimilate uncontacted peoples are done ostensibly to ‘save’ uncontacted peoples — whether spiritually or materially. But these claims are rooted in supremacist stereotyping, deny the full dignity and humanity of uncontacted peoples — and inevitably lead to further violations of those rights. In fact, the claims ring doubly hollow: firstly, they go against the people’s will and bring not good but disaster; and secondly, forcing contact is almost inevitably a precursor to — or a front for — mercenary exploitation of their land and destruction of their way of life.

Reflecting on practices in Brazil before the no-contact policy, former Brazilian government expert Sydney Possuelo made clear that claims about progress and development were merely an excuse to ‘pacify’ the people and steal their land. He explained, “It’s precisely when the Indians become an obstacle to some form of development — a ranch, a road, a project, a dam, or whatever — that’s when they call in [government contact] teams. To be honest, no contact has ever been made to protect the interests of the Indigenous person.”

These ulterior motives are examined in more detail in the following chapters.

TESTIMONY

Atxu Marimã, Hi-Merimã people, Brazil

Atxu was born in the early 1980s to a large Hi-Merimã family living uncontacted in the Brazilian Amazon. He has fond memories of his childhood, of games in the forest and his father's stories. But aged only 7 or 8, amidst exploitation and violence from invading rubber tappers, he was forced to make contact with outsiders. He now works with FUNAI to monitor and protect uncontacted peoples living around the Purus river region where he grew up. In February 2025, Atxu told Survival his story.

"I've always loved the forest. I was born there — I lived there. I've understood the forest since I was a little boy. It's never left my head and it never will.

"I have many memories. Of my mum, my dad, my brothers. Running through the woods, playing hide and seek. When we find traces [of uncontacted people during our expeditions today], I always remember. The fire — they do it the same way we did..."

Atxu's family avoided contact with the invaders, fleeing deeper into the forest whenever they came near.

"The loggers were looking for wood where we lived. We knew for a fact that they had firearms. Rifles. Dad saw the 'civilized' people. But he never let them see him. He kept us away so they wouldn't attack us...kill us. He protected us."

Then, on a trip upriver, his father died in a tragic accident. Without their father, who hunted for them, his family became even more vulnerable. Still facing the threat of outsiders, they were forced to seek contact in a nearby settler village of non-Indigenous people. It had disastrous consequences.

"The contact...I don't remember the year, but I was very young, still small. After contact, we went through a lot of...very difficult things. We got in touch with a guy called Raimundo Auzier. We visited his house. At first it was good, but then it got bad. My mother wanted to leave, to go back home. But it wasn't possible... she caught the flu. [She and] my aunt died. My baby brother disappeared and to this day nobody knows...It's a story I don't like to tell."

Alone and vulnerable without their parents, Atxu and his siblings were distributed among families in the village. Though Atxu refers to those he ended up with as his "adoptive family", the situation he describes is one of servitude: he was given limited access to food and clothing, forced to carry out unpaid labor and to renounce his language and culture.

"I didn't understand the Portuguese they spoke. They didn't understand me either. They were very prejudiced...they said I had to stop speaking my own language: 'don't speak it, we don't like it. We want you to speak Portuguese.' After 12, 13 years, I no longer spoke my language. I forgot, I stopped speaking it.

“[As a child] I didn’t understand. But after I became an adult, I understood: I was dominated by them. I didn’t have the power to say, “I’m not going to abandon my culture.” I didn’t have the power to do that.

“We started working with wood, working in the rain. It was hard work. Then one day the FUNAI [Brazilian government Indigenous Affairs department] people [came]. My [adoptive] father who brought me up in the village, he didn’t want me to tell the real story. So because of him I didn’t tell the truth at the time. FUNAI came to ask questions about what they were doing with me, and about the disappearance of my people. If they were really massacred. In fact they were, but in the end I didn’t tell the truth. Because I was afraid of them, of the people who raised me. The ‘civilized’ people. I’d already received threats that if I told [FUNAI], they’d beat me. Kill me. It’s a sad story, for me to pretend that that didn’t happen. I was little. I was scared.”

At 15, Atxu left the village and found work in Manaus. Years later, he was tracked down by Daniel Cangussu, a FUNAI official, who invited him to return to the Purus region to work with FUNAI protecting uncontacted territories, including the fully recognized Hi-Merimã territory. Atxu uses his unique knowledge to help safeguard uncontacted peoples from invaders like missionaries, who now represent one of the biggest threats in the region.

“The important thing is to fight for the land. We’re going to fight for the land, we’re going to fight for the people who don’t want contact. The most important thing is not contacting the people but protecting them — just like my land, which is protected. Not letting the loggers or the hunters invade the land. Let’s fight for our land, let’s fight for these [uncontacted] people who are threatened all the time. Not for one day or two days, but always. It’s important to fight for our uncontacted people.”

4. Nation-building at any cost

“

Our wealth is here in the land... our clean air, our rain... That’s our wealth. But for the government, wealth is soya, sugarcane, and cattle. Non-Indigenous people think like that, but we don’t... They think that Indigenous people don’t produce anything, and are lazy. They think that Indigenous people aren’t developing. Why would we need to develop if we’re already developed in our own way? Non-Indigenous people say that Brazilian society needs to develop in order to improve. How’s it going to improve if to date it hasn’t improved?... Why don’t we go and develop them?”

Tainaky Tenetehar, one of the Indigenous Guajajara Guardians who protect the land they share with the uncontacted Awá, to Survival, 2019

Governments and politicians sometimes claim justification for forced contact — or dismiss concerns about it — by emphasizing the greater good. That is, they frame forced contact and/or the invasion of uncontacted peoples' territories as acceptable when it serves some supposedly greater purpose such as nation building or national economic development. This is neo-colonialism that denies uncontacted peoples their self-determination, steals their land, and puts their survival in danger in pursuit of the material prosperity of an invading society.

4.1 Nationalism

Colonizing governments have, for centuries, seized the lands of Indigenous peoples in the name of the 'nation', with racist contempt for those who had been there long before and who do not recognize that nation. Uncontacted Indigenous peoples are still under threat from colonization begun long ago, and it continues to unfold today. Governments of whom those peoples know nothing claim the right to assert power over uncontacted peoples, and seize their land, in pursuit of 'national sovereignty'. It is a particularly brutal process in West Papua, which is claimed by Indonesia, but is also pushed by politicians as a justification for seizing uncontacted peoples' territories in South American countries, including Brazil.



Vale mining company's train transporting iron ore runs along the edge of the Awá reserve near the Awá community of Tiracambu, Brazil. © Charlie Hamilton James

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples are, by definition, unintegrated with the state. They have no concept of state borders drawn (and redrawn) by others across their land, of being governed by distant officials, or of outsiders' notions of "nationality". Yet this concept is still used against them, a continuing colonization.

The uncontacted Ayoreo in the Paraguayan Chaco, the only uncontacted people in the Americas outside the Amazon, continue to resist Paraguay's century-old project of nation building in the region. In the 1920s and 1930s, Paraguay and Bolivia skirmished and fought a war over which would claim the vast Indigenous territories of the Chaco, which they saw as empty wilderness. Paraguay colonized by subsidizing and incentivizing Mennonite settlers, ignoring the rights of the Ayoreo and other Indigenous peoples,⁸¹ and those settlers transformed forested Indigenous land into vast cattle farms. Ranches are still expanding into uncontacted Ayoreo territory today — the Paraguayan government offers incentives for agro-livestock exploitation, while the uncontacted Ayoreo continue to flee bulldozers destroying what is left of their forest.

Nationalism is an explicit threat to uncontacted peoples in Asia and the Pacific. For the government of Indonesia — and to some extent India — the existence of people within what they claim as their borders, and without ties to the state, challenges nationalistic ideas of territorial control. Indonesia has reacted by taking extreme measures to integrate Indigenous peoples, including uncontacted peoples, into state systems, and — crucially — to seize their land.

Since Indonesia illegally occupied West Papua in 1963, it has embarked on a brutal and ongoing campaign to “Indonesianize” West Papua’s Indigenous population, including its uncontacted tribes, disregarding their right to self-determination. This includes a “transmigration” program⁸² which has moved hundreds of thousands of Indonesians into the territory, giving them land stripped from West Papuans⁸³. There has been brutal violence — including rape⁸⁴, crucifixion⁸⁵, mutilation⁸⁶, aerial bombings⁸⁷, and alleged chemical weapons use⁸⁸. Successive governments claimed these vicious policies would ‘develop’ and integrate those whom former President Suharto termed “backward and primitive Papuans still living in the Stone Age”⁸⁹.

There are approximately 2.5 million Indigenous people in West Papua today, comprising some 250 tribes. Many had no contact with non-Indigenous societies prior to the 20th century. The Baliem Valley — home to tens of thousands of Indigenous people — was only entered by non-Papuans in 1938. Many others remained uncontacted before the Indonesian occupation in the 1960s. At the turn of the millennium, there were thought to be approximately 40 uncontacted tribes in West Papua. After decades of missionary activity and the Indonesian government’s brutal campaign of violence, it is likely this number has dramatically reduced. The survivors remain in danger. In some areas, the Indonesian authorities accuse anyone living in the

rainforest as being associated with the banned Independence movement, and therefore a potential military target. It is highly plausible this genocide⁹⁰ has wiped out entire uncontacted tribes.

Today, there is credible evidence of at least two Indigenous tribes in West Papua of whom some are uncontacted. There are reports of other uncontacted peoples in the country, and Survival estimates that there may be up to 10 Indigenous peoples or groups living without contact in West Papua’s rainforests. All are extremely at risk from any interaction with the Indonesian security forces or government officials.

Even if nationalism and national sovereignty are most obviously dangerous to uncontacted peoples in West Papua and Indonesia, there are powerful politicians elsewhere using these rationalizations for their neo-colonial projects. In South American countries, anti-Indigenous politicians push policies and legislation that weaponize the concept of ‘national interest’. This includes laws and proposed laws that override Indigenous rights in “the interests of defense policy and national sovereignty” — as it is expressed in Brazil’s Law 14,701 of 2023⁹¹. Catastrophically for uncontacted peoples, this concept is invariably defined so broadly that it could include any ‘development’ project, whether agribusiness, mining or something equally destructive. It also explicitly unites the justifications of ‘sovereignty’ and economic interest.



CASE STUDY

The Ayoreo Totobiegosode people, Paraguay

The Ayoreo of Paraguay and Bolivia have long been resisting many of the greatest threats to uncontacted Indigenous peoples — including missionaries, cattle ranchers and other land grabbers. The assault on them and their lands has been intense and savage. Some Ayoreo people remain uncontacted in their territory, mostly in Paraguay, and the contacted Ayoreo fear for their survival.

The first major threat swept in around a century ago. The Ayoreo's home is in the Gran Chaco, covering a vast area of dry forest in northern Paraguay and part of Bolivia. From the 1920s onwards, Mennonite farmers arrived, encouraged by the Paraguayan government as part of a process of nation-building. These colonizers stole, cleared and cultivated the Ayoreo's land, establishing their own settlements on the territory and driving off the Indigenous owners of the land.

In the 1970s, missionaries arrived, claiming to care for Indigenous souls whilst appearing savagely indifferent to their lives or their humanity. The New Tribes Mission (now also known as Ethnos360) helped organize 'manhunts', in which uncontacted Ayoreo people were chased and captured in an effort to convert them to Christianity. Many Ayoreo were killed in violent confrontations. Those hunted down were brought out of the forest by force, settled in the missionaries' base and made to renounce their culture, beliefs and way of life. Some of the captured and evangelized Ayoreo were in turn sent by the missionaries to chase and hunt down others — often their relatives — who remained uncontacted, like the Ayoreo Totobiegosode.



Ayoreo man Eode at the New Tribes Mission base, 1979. Captured in a manhunt, he died a few days later. © Luke Holland/Survival International

The last known manhunt in Paraguay happened in 1986: five Ayoreo people were killed and more than two dozen captured — many of whom then died from infectious diseases against which they had no immunity.

Now, while still suffering the ill health and trauma generated by this brutal contact, the Ayoreo's survival is threatened by cattle ranching. Their forest — and all they depend upon within it — is being destroyed at an alarming rate. The contacted Ayoreo Totobiegosode have been supporting the resistance of their uncontacted relatives for decades, and in 1993 submitted a formal land claim under a Paraguayan law that recognizes Indigenous people's right to own their 'traditional' lands. They fear that their uncontacted relatives — South America's only uncontacted tribe living outside of the Amazon rainforest — will not survive if the State does not grant their land titles and urgently expel all ranchers from their territory. The claim is yet to be resolved. Survival is meanwhile supporting their efforts, both lobbying the government and calling on all buyers of leather not to source from any company operating on Ayoreo land.

4.2 'Economic development'

“

We have learned, over all these years..., that attracting uncontacted people [to make contact] usually takes place for two reasons: one, when these Indigenous people are living in territories coveted by some private economic project, and are preventing its full implementation; or two, when they are occupying areas of interest to government projects.”

Report of meeting of Brazilian experts on uncontacted peoples, 1987

Even more often than appealing to national identity, governments attempt to justify seizing and building on uncontacted peoples' land as a necessary part of economic development for the wider good. Even in countries where officially recognized Indigenous territories are protected from such 'development', infrastructure projects right alongside their land can open their territories to invasion and devastation. Government-led or government-endorsed development projects — including roads, dams, railways, industrial parks and a huge port — are threatening at least 38 uncontacted peoples in Bolivia, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Paraguay, Peru and West Papua.

Official exploitation of forested lands often begins with government-led exploration and roadbuilding, sometimes followed by infrastructure projects such as dams or hydro-electric power stations. This opens the forest to both settlement and exploitation, which leads to rapidly spreading deforestation: in the Amazon, 95 percent of deforestation happens within 5.5km of roads (including illegal roads) or 1km of rivers⁹². Workers and land-grabbers follow, as does land exploitation both legal and illegal, including plantations, mines, other extractive industries, and cattle ranches. The latter is a major driver of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon⁹³. New arrivals accelerate deforestation, pollute rivers, and destroy hunting and fishing grounds on which uncontacted and other Indigenous peoples depend for their survival. They also unleash violence. Uncontacted peoples sometimes try to fight off these invasions,

but they are always outnumbered, outgunned, and face the risk of deadly epidemics.

Even in Brazil, with a policy of no-contact and theoretically strong protections for Indigenous people, government-sponsored 'development' projects continue to bring catastrophe to uncontacted Indigenous people, with at least 28 peoples currently at risk because of infrastructure projects.

In the past, the Brazilian government forced contact on uncontacted peoples in the Amazon as part of projects like the 'March to the West' in the 1940s, a massive plan to "open up" parts of the Brazilian Amazon. During the building of the Trans-Amazonian Highway (BR-230) in the 1970s, which was carved through supposedly uninhabited forest, construction workers encountered people from around 30 tribes, of whom 11 were uncontacted peoples. The government began what it called "pacification" of these tribes⁹⁴ — in reality a brutal process of violence, disease and death. Thousands of Indigenous people were killed, and the Jiahui and Tenharin peoples almost entirely wiped out.

Today, the Brazilian government — and state governments — have multiple plans to build and pave roads and railways right alongside Indigenous territories. These routes into the forest open the way for landgrabbers and are a magnet for the illegal loggers and miners who are destroying so much of the Amazon, without regard for whether it is Indigenous land. (See chapter 5.)

The planned Ferrogrão railway is a major threat. It will run alongside highway BR-163, which killed most of the uncontacted Panará when it was bulldozed through their land in the 1960s and 1970s⁹⁵, and which is today a hotspot for fires and deforestation⁹⁶. In 2023, despite strenuous opposition from Indigenous organizations, the Brazilian government

relaunched plans for a railway parallel to the road⁹⁷. It will pass alongside numerous Indigenous territories, exposing at least nine uncontacted peoples to devastating danger — with the most vulnerable being the peoples known as those of Riozinho do Anfrísio, Serra do Cachimbo and Rio Jamanxim⁹⁸. Another major danger is highway BR-319, abandoned for nearly 40 years, which in 2024 the Brazilian government pledged to ‘reconstruct’ and fully pave.⁹⁹ This project, supposedly to “promote the development of rural and forestry activities”¹⁰⁰, will expose many Indigenous territories to risks of deforestation and disease, and poses a devastating threat to at least a further nine uncontacted Indigenous groups, including the uncontacted of Bom Futuro¹⁰¹. In Mato Grosso, the state government is planning to pave a road just 3km from the territory of the uncontacted Kawahiva, whose lands are already surrounded by devastation.



Three hundred Indigenous people, small farmers, fisherfolk, and local residents occupied the Belo Monte Dam project, removing a strip of earth to restore the Xingu's natural flow and “freeing the river.” Participants spelled out the words “Pare Belo Monte” (“Stop Belo Monte”) to send a powerful message about the devastating impacts of the dam prior to the UN Rio+20 Summit in 2012. © Marcello Casal Jr/Agência Brasil

“

We were in the village and everyone started dying. The others went off into the forest and then more died. We were sick and weak, so we couldn't bury the dead. They were left to rot on the ground. The vultures ate everything”.

Akè Panará, Brazil, a survivor of the contact that killed most of his people when Highway BR-163 was built through their land, 1998¹⁰²

The Belo Monte dam¹⁰³ led to land-grabbing and deforestation ever since planning began in the 1970s and has been described by Brazilian Indigenous peoples as “madness” that is “threatening uncontacted Indigenous peoples with extinction”¹⁰⁴. Since construction began in 2010, it has inflicted serious damage on Indigenous peoples, including rapid deforestation and pollution in and around the territories of the uncontacted and recently contacted peoples in the Ituna Itatá and Apyterewa territories. The latter was the most deforested Indigenous territory in the country from 2019 to 2022¹⁰⁵.

Peru explicitly allows building and exploitation of natural resources even within officially recognized territories of uncontacted peoples if “exploitation is of public necessity for the state”. In practice, this opens uncontacted peoples’ land mainly to oil and gas exploitation and to megaprojects. The Kakataibo Indigenous Reserve has been cut in two by a huge road — literally paving the way for illegal logging and drug trafficking on the land of the uncontacted Kakataibo.¹⁰⁶

In Indonesia, any development considered to be a “strategic national project” is controlled by the central government in Jakarta, and security is often provided by the Indonesian military and police. These — particularly the Indonesian paramilitary brigade BRIMOB¹⁰⁷ — are notorious for human rights violations against Indigenous people; a police chief working with BRIMOB threatened to “chop up” Indigenous West Papuan activists¹⁰⁸. At least one Indonesian strategic national project is currently posing an enormous threat to the survival of an uncontacted people: the Indonesia Weda Bay Industrial Park (IWIP), a rapidly growing nickel processing hub for nickel mining on the island of Halmahera. It directly overlaps with a large area of the uncontacted Hongana Manyawa’s territory and processes nickel from many of the 19 mining companies now tearing up their rainforest. Many uncontacted Hongana Manyawa are now on the run from bulldozers, excavators, and potentially the security forces.¹⁰⁹

Shompen men traversing a river on Great Nicobar Island. © Anthropological Survey of India



The Great Nicobar Project in India is a giant government scheme threatening uncontacted people. This “mega-development” plan aims to transform Great Nicobar Island, the forested home of the uncontacted Shompen, into the “Hong Kong of India”. If the project goes ahead, huge swaths of the Shompen’s unique rainforest will be destroyed — to be replaced by a mega-port; a city; an international airport; a power station; a military base; an industrial park; and a population equal to that of Las Vegas, representing a population increase of nearly 8,000 percent.

The Shompen, the majority of whom are uncontacted, will be wiped out if this project goes ahead. Their rainforest will be destroyed, their land occupied by settlers, and their sacred river system ruined, which will kill off their pandanus trees,

one of their most important sources of food. With their rivers polluted, the Shompen’s ability to survive, and their entire way of life, will face collapse.¹¹⁰ The government is presenting this huge scheme as a “strategic, defence and national security”¹¹¹ issue, using this to justify withholding many project details — and evade scrutiny. While the Shompen and their ancestors have lived in harmony on their island for up to 10,000 years, surviving natural disasters including the 2004 tsunami, a single government program in the name of so-called development now threatens to wipe them out entirely.



Indian government visualisation of the Great Nicobar mega-port, just one of several massive developments that are set to cause widespread ecological destruction on the Shompen’s only island. © Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways



Hydroelectric dams, Bolivia

“We would be forced to leave our spaces, our ancestral domains. We would be giving up the most vital thing: without territory there are no Indigenous peoples. This would be to accept a silent death. Wherever they take us, it will never be the same,” said Alex Villca of the Uchupiamona Indigenous people of Bolivia. He’s talking about plans to build hydroelectric power plants which will flood his people’s lands and those of five or more other Indigenous peoples. Alex explains that there is at least one uncontacted Indigenous group who will end up under water.

“We know from our brothers that there is a people in voluntary isolation there, in the heights of Chepete, and that they must be unaware of all these plans. Imagine how they will be affected if the project is realized,” he said.

The uncontacted Indigenous people are believed to be Mosetenes. They live in the Chepete mountain range.

The planned Chepete hydroelectric dam would flood 46 square kilometers of the Pílon Lajas reserve, while the El Bala reservoir would extend over 94 square kilometers of Madidi,

according to the Empresa Nacional de Energía Eléctrica (Ende). More than 5,000 Indigenous people would be ejected from their territories.

Despite harassment and death threats, Indigenous groups have been fighting the plans for more than 50 years — but the proposal keeps resurfacing. In 2016, Indigenous communities held a 12-day protest blockading the river and succeeded in expelling the companies which had started work in the territories without attaining Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) from the people living there.

In 2018, Ruth Alipaz, an Indigenous activist from Bolivia, spoke at the United Nations, saying, “I come to ask on behalf of my brothers and sisters of the Mosetén, Chimán, Ese Eja, Tacana, Leco nations and my own territory, Uchupiamona (La Paz), that our rights be respected and that our voices be heard against the Chepete-Bala hydroelectric megaprojects”.

4.3 Nature-based solutions (NBS) and conservation

“

We have seen the experiences of [other Indigenous] people, who have accepted REDD [a type of carbon credit project], their carbon credits and environmental conservation projects. They can no longer hunt, grow crops, or use materials they need for celebrations and rituals. We know how to take care of nature because it is our mother and we don't want another carbon credit contract, because it is just another way to take us away from our sacred lands.”

Kayapó protestor, Brazil, 2015¹¹²



Indigenous activists demonstrate against carbon offsetting projects at the People's Climate March, New York, 2014. © Joe Brusky www.instagram.com/joebrusky

Land protection and efforts to combat the climate crisis are crucial for uncontacted Indigenous peoples. But conservation or climate change mitigation efforts that give private actors control over uncontacted peoples' land and resources — or the right to make money from them — pose a danger. While uncontacted peoples may be spared the worst excesses of colonial-style conservation that have evicted and abused millions of other Indigenous peoples, any conservation project that encourages tourism, or that grants their land to outsiders as a source of revenue, is a threat. Recognizing uncontacted peoples' land ownership is the only way to protect their rights, their lives, their land, and the climate.

Climate breakdown and biodiversity collapse both pose a massive existential threat to uncontacted Indigenous peoples, all of whom live in and rely on forests. Conservation-driven land protection and Nature-Based Solutions (NBS) that are supposed to fight climate change and protect biodiversity might sound like initiatives that benefit everyone, including uncontacted Indigenous peoples. Yet they often build on long-standing traditions of racist, colonial-style 'fortress' conservation, characterized by land grabs and violence, and many contribute to the growing trend of linking environmental protection to the "commodification" of nature — that is, trying to turn the protection of nature into a money-making enterprise, such as by selling carbon credits. All of these act very much against the rights and interests of Indigenous peoples.



Conservation imposed from the outside and monetization of nature pose serious potential risks for all Indigenous peoples. Uncontacted peoples, by definition, do not live in communities that appear in official management plans or that are policed by wildlife guards; and they are unlikely to experience the same atrocities in the name of conservation that have been inflicted on millions of contacted Indigenous people. These include brutal evictions and appalling abuse when Indigenous people, particularly in Africa and Asia, are ‘cleared’ from their land to make way for national parks or other Protected Areas, and “forest enclosures, militarization, fraud, coercion, forced displacements and evictions”¹¹³ imposed on Indigenous people — from Papua New Guinea to Kenya to Brazil — when their land is used for carbon offsetting.

Yet the impulse to protect land only when it is in some way commodified or made part of a market economy remains dangerous. It incentivizes land-grabbing and can appear to governments as a profitable alternative to recognizing Indigenous land. The Madre de Dios Territorial Reserve in Peru, created in 2002 as Indigenous land for the uncontacted Mashco Piro, Yora and Amahuaca, excludes large parts of these peoples’ territory. The month after the reserve’s creation, the state granted logging licenses in these excluded areas to several

A Kamayurá girl with her pet spider monkey watches a forest fire burning on the horizon. The many Indigenous peoples living in the Xingu Indigenous Territory rely on the hundreds of rivers and lakes for fish, turtles and freshwater plants. But since its construction in 2010, the huge Belo Monte dam has brought deforestation, pollution and drought. © Ricardo Teles

companies, including Maderacre — which operates both a logging concession and a carbon offsetting project on this land. Companies including easyJet have paid Maderacre to “offset” their emissions against forest which should be recognized and protected as the territory of uncontacted Indigenous people.¹¹⁴

Where Indigenous land is ‘protected’ through being given National Park status, this encourages tourism, which itself is a growing danger to uncontacted peoples. In Peru, an influx of tourists to the Manu National Park poses a huge threat to the uncontacted peoples whose home it is, including the Mashco Piro. In the 2010s, dozens of encounters between uncontacted Indigenous people, tourists and settlers were recorded in Manu. Some people traveling through the area left items of clothing on the riverbanks for uncontacted people to find. Amid fears that some tourists were seeking out uncontacted people as part of a “human safari”, these encounters and supposed “gifts” posed enormous danger of infecting uncontacted people with diseases to which they have no immunity. (See more on tourism in chapter 5.)

Mechanisms intended for conservation are sometimes used to help protect uncontacted peoples’ territories, when it has not yet been possible to secure full recognition as Indigenous land. In Venezuela, biosphere reserve status has helped give some protection to the Yanomami people, including uncontacted groups, whose land it is. Yet this is a weak stopgap. Even when violence or abuse is absent, a conservation-led approach to land protection is highly precarious for uncontacted peoples, a far frailer guarantee than proper recognition of their rights. Extractive industries or development projects are often welcomed into such areas, or conservation status is easily overturned to make way for extractive or other industries. From 2014 to 2024, the Indian government approved more than 270 projects inside supposedly Protected Areas¹¹⁵, including national

parks and biodiversity hotspots, while others simply had their protected status revoked to pave the way for destructive ‘development’ — including cancellation of a wildlife sanctuary on the territory of the Shompen on Great Nicobar Island, most of whom are uncontacted.

The best way to protect forests and biodiversity is to recognize Indigenous land rights. United Nations data shows that between 2003 and 2016, non-Indigenous ‘Protected Areas’ in the Amazon lost twice as much carbon in their forests as recognized Indigenous territories¹¹⁶. A conservation-led approach to protecting uncontacted peoples’ land, by contrast, is a poor — and potentially highly dangerous — substitute for genuine recognition of uncontacted peoples’ territories.



CASE STUDY

Xingu Indigenous Park & the Panará people, Brazil

The Xingu Indigenous Park in the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil, was created in 1961. The first Indigenous territory approved by the Brazilian government, the park was the result of an expedition into uncontacted peoples' lands which had devastating consequences.

The Roncador-Xingu Expedition — which started in 1943 and lasted for many years — was part of the government's "March to the West" program designed to open the central-northern region of Brazil for colonization. Led by three brothers — Orlando, Cláudio and Leonardo Villas-Bôas — the expedition entered the southern Amazon and advanced into the territory of several isolated uncontacted Indigenous peoples. For these peoples, the expedition was deadly.

Over their decades in the Amazon, the Villas-Bôas brothers made first contact with various uncontacted peoples — and became increasingly aware of the widespread death and social disruption that resulted. As an alternative to the integration

proposed by the federal government — which they later stated "has been a disastrous policy for indigenous peoples" — the brothers championed the creation of the Xingu Indigenous Park as a "safe territory" into which they would relocate recently contacted Indigenous peoples. Since its foundation in 1961, the Park has become home to 16 different peoples who left their ancestral lands for the security that, at the time, the park seemed to represent.

The Panará were one of these peoples. The Villas Bôas brothers began trying to contact them in 1967; by the time they succeeded in 1973, a highway was being built through the Panará's territory, and construction crews were bringing in diseases that proved lethal for the Panará. Within two years of contact, two thirds of the Panará died from infectious diseases like flu. Facing the prospect of all the Panará dying, the Villas Bôas brothers airlifted them to the Xingu Park in 1975. Within a few months of arriving there, their population had plummeted to 69 people.

While their population eventually grew in the Xingu, their birth rate stayed low and they never settled, despite moving their village several times in search of a home. The park's land and plants were unfamiliar, and the Panará had ongoing conflict with the Indigenous Kayapó, who live in the Park. The Panará wanted to be back in their own land. In an overflight of their ancestral territory in 1991, they identified a region which had escaped destruction by farmers and miners. They lodged a demand for the return of their land, and in 1994 the Brazilian authorities concluded the identification of the territory. Over the next two years, Panará families started to return to the land and rebuild their homes and lives.

In 1994, the Panará, supported by the NGOs CEDI (now known as Instituto Socioambiental) and NDI, filed a lawsuit against the Federal Government for the harm, losses and damages they

suffered because of contact and forced removal from their land. In 2000, in an unprecedented decision, a federal court ruled in favor of the Panará, unanimously condemning the federal government and ordering it to pay damages for the harm it had caused. This historic decision was the first ruling from the Brazilian judiciary to recognize the liability of the state in its policies towards Indigenous peoples.

5. Profit, death and destruction

“

All this land belonged to our ancestors, but the outsiders are going to destroy it all. I am very worried about this destruction, because we don't know exactly where the [uncontacted] people still in the forest are living. I have a sister among them. This is why we don't want the outsiders to destroy more of the forest with their bulldozers.”

Ojai Posorojai, an Ayoreo man first contacted in 2004, Paraguay, speaking to Survival in 2007

The overwhelming impetus behind threats to uncontacted Indigenous peoples is the rush to exploit their lands and resources for profit. As has always been the case with colonial enterprises — justified by the British in the 19th century as the arrival of “Christianity, civilization and commerce” — those invading may claim to be bringing progress or religion, but the profit motive is always present. Almost all uncontacted peoples today are being threatened by at least one profit-driven industry.

The lands of uncontacted peoples are, for the most part, heavily forested, and many hold vast reserves of oil, gas or mineral wealth. From the rubber boom in Brazil and Peru in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to the ongoing gold rush in the Amazon and the new nickel rush in Indonesia, private actors ranging from small-scale operators to huge multinational corporations have placed profits above the rights, wellbeing and survival of the uncontacted peoples who own the land and resources. Destroying these forest homes for mining, logging, agribusiness or oil and gas drilling is murderous; it is also highly lucrative.

Survival's research has revealed that nearly all uncontacted Indigenous people around the world are directly threatened by profit-driven industries — 96 percent of all uncontacted peoples and groups. Extractive industries — whether or not operating with legal permits — pose the greatest danger to uncontacted peoples today. Logging is damaging the territories of almost 65 percent of uncontacted peoples, and mining more than 40 percent. Drug trafficking is also a major concern — and is often linked to illegal mining or logging — while tourism and media-influencers pose a growing risk¹¹⁷.

The scale of the danger should not be underestimated. The world lost an area of rainforest equal to the size of Switzerland in 2023 alone, equivalent to 10 football pitches each minute.¹¹⁸ Recent research¹¹⁹ shows that more than 40 percent of the Amazon rainforest is already cut by roads or sits within 10km of a road. In the Brazilian Amazon, 86 percent of these roads are “unofficial” — bulldozed and built off official roads by loggers, cattle ranchers, miners or other land-grabbers.

The loggers, miners, cattle ranches or palm oil plantations do not operate in a vacuum. The resources extracted from uncontacted Indigenous peoples' territories — or farmed on land seized from them — are sold to car manufacturers,

furniture makers, supermarket chains, jewelry makers and other companies that feed global markets and consumption. Full recognition and enforcement of uncontacted peoples' rights to their territories and to their autonomy are necessary; and so are regulations, standards and transparent processes that keep uncontacted peoples' resources out of supply chains.

CASE STUDY



Amakaria & Jakarewyj Awá, Brazil

Amakaria and Jakarewyj, two Indigenous Awá sisters, lived with Jakarewyj's son Irahoa uncontacted in their forest on the north-eastern fringes of the Brazilian Amazon. They hunted, fished, and collected fruits and honey in their territory. They knew that some of their relatives lived in settled villages in contact with outsiders. But they chose to remain in their forest, avoiding all contact. When loggers invaded their land, with their “screaming” chainsaws, Amakaria, Jakarewyj and Irahoa ran and hid.

Their people, the Awá, survived decades of land theft and massacres in their forest. Violent colonization, unleashed by roads built into their territory in the 1960s, intensified with the Great Carajás Project in the 1980s; it included the opening of the largest open-pit iron ore mine in the world, with an accompanying railway and road network cutting through the heart of Awá land. Thousands of illegal loggers, settlers, ranchers and others invaded the forest. Funded by the World Bank and the European Union, the project marked a catastrophic turning point for the Awá.

Amakaria, Jakarewyj and Irahoa survived when the rest of their group was wiped out in this brutal invasion. They lived on their own for years, avoiding contact with outsiders as a means of survival and self-defense.

But the colonizing forces kept closing in on them, and in 2014 the family was forced to make contact with other Awá in a settled village. “We were scared... We were trapped,” Irahoa later told Survival.

“They were surrounded by loggers,” explained one of the Awá people in the village. “We heard lots of noise from the chainsaws nearby and the tractors carving roads to transport the wood, and there were many trees marked for felling. So we said ‘Come with us, otherwise the loggers will kill you.’ And they came with us.”

Forced into contact, Amakaria and Jakarewyj almost immediately fell ill, contracting severe flu and tuberculosis, and becoming so dangerously unwell that they had to be emergency air-lifted to the state capital for treatment.

Once their condition improved, the two sisters returned to the contacted Awá village. But they soon after decided to return to the forest and live without contact once more. Irahoa decided to remain in one of the settled Awá villages, but his mother and aunt said that they didn't like the noise, the food, or the heat in the settled villages, and they wanted to be surrounded by their beautiful forest. They covered their tracks when they went, so no one could follow them.

Back in the forest, the sisters hunted, fished, and moved around once more. But Jakarewyj had been severely weakened by the previous respiratory infections. Succumbing to illness, she died in her hammock. Amakaria lived on her own for a while, until she decided to make contact with her relatives in a settled

village once more. She now lives there with her nephew Irahoa, forced out of her life in the forest by those destroying it.

Today, there are believed to be several groups of Awá living uncontacted in the forest. Some are in Indigenous territories such as Arariboia and Caru, which officially have government protection, while others live in areas without official recognition as Indigenous land. Even where officially recognized, their forests are still under constant invasion by illegal loggers and cattle ranchers. The Brazilian authorities must do more to protect the Awá's rights and forest.



Jakarewyj lies gravely ill in her hammock next to her sister Amakaria, a few months after they were contacted in December 2015. Jakarewyj contracted flu and a serious respiratory illness after she was brought out of the forest following its invasion by loggers. © Sarah Shenker/Survival International

5.1 Logging

“

In the old days we hunted a lot of game — there were lots of howler monkeys and deer but today there's very little left because the forest has been chopped down. With the deforestation there's no game left and the whites are now living very near us. I spend a lot of time thinking what our life will be like, because without our land life will be very difficult. Every day the game goes further away. So I don't know what the future will be like. We're going to fight for our land. We're not going to let the whites in. We're not going to let them finish our land.”

To'o Awá, Brazil, to Survival, 2002

Logging is the most common threat to uncontacted Indigenous peoples, putting nearly two thirds in danger, in every country where they live. In Asia and the Pacific, it is generally licensed. Logging in the Amazon includes both licensed logging on land not properly recognized as Indigenous territory, and illegal logging on fully recognized Indigenous lands. It is almost invariably linked to other land exploitation and destruction.

All known uncontacted peoples live in forests, even if, as in the case of the Ayoreo in Paraguay and Bolivia, it is scrub forest that is being rapidly cleared. In some cases, uncontacted peoples' territories are the only forested land left standing in their area. Once it is cleared, other industries move in. That is, logging on their lands is itself profitable, and is often a prelude to further exploitation, such as cattle ranching, mining or monoculture farming. Logging directly destroys uncontacted peoples' forests and their means of survival, leaves them more exposed to violence and disease, and massively increases the risk of forest fires.¹²⁰

Brazil's Ituna Itatá Indigenous Territory is home to uncontacted people only. Land-grabbers have laid claims for almost the whole territory — claiming 94 percent of it in the registry¹²¹ of Brazil's Rural Environmental Agency¹²² — and have undertaken massive, illegal logging, making it one of the most deforested Indigenous Territories in the country. This has in turn contributed to widespread fires.¹²³

Amazonian mahogany brings huge profits, driving a massive rush for the wood sometimes called “green gold”. Mahogany felling has been illegal in Brazil since 2001, as part of efforts to limit deforestation, but illegal logging is still rampant, and the industry continues to surge in Peru — in the very regions where uncontacted peoples live¹²⁴.



Government agents and federal police destroy an illegal settlement inside Ituna Itatá Indigenous Territory, Brazil. © Ibama/ MPF

Loggers' invasions of uncontacted peoples' territories make contact almost inevitable. In 1996, illegal loggers forced contact on the Murunahua people; in the following years more than half of them died, mainly from colds, flu and other respiratory infections.¹²⁵ The Mashco Piro — thought to be the largest uncontacted tribe in the world — face a similar danger. A logging concession for shihuahuaco and other hardwoods on part of their territory — originally certified by the Forest Stewardship Council as “sustainable” despite being on uncontacted Indigenous land¹²⁶ — is putting their forest and their hunting grounds in danger. That incursion is driving confrontations between the Mashco Piro, loggers and neighbors as the tribe struggle to protect their territory.



Jorge Murunahua. © Neil Giardino

“

When the loggers made contact with us, we came out of the forest. That was when the disease came. We didn't know what a cold was then. Half of us died. My aunt died. My nephew died. Half of my people died.”

Jorge Murunahua, Peru, who lost his eye when he was shot by loggers during first contact, to Survival, 2006

The Brazilian state of Maranhão is home to an estimated eight uncontacted Indigenous groups, and to high-value trees heavily targeted by illegal loggers. More than three quarters of the original rainforest there is already devastated, and the only areas of original forest that remain are in the recognized Indigenous Territories, including the Arariboia, Alto Turiaçu, Awá and Caru territories — home to uncontacted Awá people and possibly other uncontacted peoples. The Awá are increasingly squeezed into the few remaining areas of forest, and even there they have to evade illegal loggers and other invaders. The fires that follow logging, often deliberately set, cause further devastation. In 2024, almost 70 percent of the Arariboia territory was burned¹²⁷, dramatically restricting the Awá's land.

“

Criminals set fire to the forest last year. ... We are very worried about the uncontacted Awá as they live in dense forest and a lot burned down. The people behind Paulo Paulino's murder [a murdered Indigenous land defender] are near the Awá. They made a big roça [field or plantation] and set fire to it. The fire spread and it all burned — it's where the Awá are.”

Aldo Guajajara, one of the Guajajara Guardians who defend the territory of the uncontacted Awá, Brazil, to Survival, 2020

Almost all the known uncontacted Indigenous peoples in Asia and the Pacific are threatened by logging, often as a gateway to other exploitation. At least two logging companies¹²⁸ operate on the territories of the uncontacted Hongana Manyawa on the Indonesian island of Halmahera. Eyewitnesses reported that in 2023 an uncontacted Hongana Manyawa man was shot dead by the Indonesian police mobile brigade (BRIMOB) who were acting as security for one of these logging companies, MAP¹²⁹ — which calls itself a “Green Eco Timber” company. Another logging concession overlaps with several mining concessions. Local reports state that the logging company WKS has a relationship with mining companies, and logs in preparation for nickel mining. In October 2023, WKS loggers filmed uncontacted Hongana Manyawa people confronting bulldozers on their territory. The loggers revved their engines to scare the Hongana Manyawa back into the forest.

Loggers seeking to cut down uncontacted peoples’ forests is the most widespread threat to their survival, affecting at least 64 percent of uncontacted peoples, and it often paves the way for even greater devastation.

Logging company Canales Tahuamanu has built logging roads inside Mashco Piro territory in S.E. Peru, and even blocked their rivers to make bridges for the logging trucks.
© FENAMAD



CASE STUDY



The Mashco Piro people, Peru

In July 2024, a large group of uncontacted Mashco Piro people emerged onto a riverbank near the edge of their territory in the Peruvian Amazon. On this occasion, Indigenous people living nearby photographed and filmed them, and asked Survival to share the images — which were published by media around the world — to illustrate the pressure on Mashco Piro territory.

The Mashco Piro had not simply stumbled onto that riverbank. They know where neighboring Indigenous peoples live, and where there are logging companies invading their forest. As their land has come under more pressure, encounters with outsiders — usually peaceful with Indigenous neighbors, but hostile and sometimes fatal with loggers — have become more frequent. But they continue to reject any sustained contact.

The Mashco Piro are descended from Indigenous people who escaped the atrocities, enslavement and killings of the brutal rubber boom in the Amazon in the late 19th century, fleeing further into the forest. They have since lived around the headwaters of rivers in the Peru-Brazil border area. Now the biggest known uncontacted Indigenous people in the world,

at least 750 of them live across a large area of forest in south-eastern Peru, while other groups of Mashco Piro have been recorded in the Brazilian state of Acre.

Mashco Piro — a name given by neighboring tribes — means ‘wild Piro-speakers’. It is not known what they call themselves, although neighboring Yine people, who also descend from survivors of the rubber boom and speak a similar language, call them by various names — some friendly (like “relatives” or “brothers”) and some less so.

The Mashco Piro people around the Madre de Dios river have increasingly frequent encounters with nearby Indigenous communities. Those close to the Las Piedras, Tahuamanu and Pariamanu rivers keep a greater (and occasionally tense) distance from their Yine neighbors. In the last few years, Mashco Piro people in this area have on a few occasions called out across the river to Yine people. Sometimes, they have come to their communities in search of food or tools. Yine people speak out for the Mashco Piro’s right to remain uncontacted. When they hear them coming, the Yine hide themselves in their houses to avoid meeting them. They plant gardens at the edge of their villages — ‘chacras’ — for the Mashco Piro to help themselves to plantains, bananas and cassava.

These Mashco Piro groups spurn any further contact. They often drive pairs of spears into the sand to form an X — their warning to outsiders to stay away.

In 2002, the Peruvian government created an Indigenous territory, the Madre de Dios territorial reserve, for the uncontacted Mashco Piro, Yora and Amahuaca peoples. But the reserve is much smaller than their actual territory — as acknowledged by the government in 2016. The remainder of their land was licensed to logging companies, who exploit their forest for profit.

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) — despite its policies against logging on Indigenous territories without consent — certified timber taken from Mashco Piro territory as sustainable, opening a greater market for what is essentially stolen timber. FSC-certified logging company Canales Tahuamanu, whose operations are almost all on Mashco Piro land, felled more mahogany trees than any other company in the country in 2022, contributing to dangerous destruction of the Mashco Piro’s home.

The logging companies vigorously fight any legal attempts by Indigenous organizations to expand and protect the recognized Mashco Piro territory. Two of them, Maderyja and Maderacre, further exploit Mashco Piro land for profit by selling carbon credits that have been bought by easyJet and other companies. The project claims to prevent logging in protected forests by paying Maderyja and Maderacre not to fell some trees — even while they are busy logging all the biggest, oldest and most precious and profitable trees, such as shihuahuaco and mahogany, in those very same forests.

All this activity is putting the Mashco Piro — and their forest — at risk. Their territory must be recognized and protected in full, and all loggers removed.

5.2 Mining

“

If we don’t support the fight for their rainforest, my uncontacted relatives will just die. The rainforest is everything, it is their heart and life. My parents and siblings are in the rainforest and without support they will die. Everything in the rainforest is getting destroyed now — the river, the animals, they are gone.”

Hongana Manyawa man with uncontacted relatives, Indonesia, speaking anonymously to Survival, 2023



Mining is a massive threat to uncontacted peoples in at least seven different countries, affecting more than four in 10 uncontacted peoples or groups. Mining for nickel, gold, zinc and other minerals is destroying the forest and bringing disease to uncontacted peoples in Indonesia, West Papua, Bolivia, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, and 50 uncontacted groups in Brazil. The biggest mining threats to uncontacted peoples in the Amazon and West Papua are currently from illegal mining — both small-scale ‘wildcat’ and large-scale mines operated by criminal enterprises — although politicians and mining companies in Brazil and elsewhere are also trying to extend the reach of the established mining industry. In Indonesia, the government currently gives full support to mining on the island of Halmahera, despite its impact on uncontacted Indigenous people. The impact in all these places is devastating: widespread deaths of contacted Indigenous children in the Yanomami territory give an indication of what uncontacted people may be experiencing or fleeing from.

Severely malnourished Yanomami children, Surucucus region, Brazil. Diseases introduced and spread by vast numbers of illegal gold miners have ravaged Yanomami communities; many parents are too ill to hunt and gather forest foods for their families. © URIHI — Associação Yanomami

In Brazil, even without various proposed laws that could rip up protections of uncontacted peoples' territories and ramp up danger from mining, there is already some government-approved mining that encroaches on uncontacted Indigenous people's land. The Pitinga cassiterite mine was built on the territory of the Kinja (Waimiri Atroari); the mine area was deliberately excluded when the territory was demarcated as official Indigenous land, specifically so that the mine could go ahead. Four uncontacted groups are thought to be living in this area.

Brazilian mining companies are backing changes to laws which would open up much more Indigenous land to large-scale mining, and are clearly hopeful that they will get such approval. By early 2022, mining companies had submitted more than 3,600 official requests to carry out mining — mostly gold mining¹³⁰ — in Indigenous territories in the Brazilian Amazon that are home to uncontacted people¹³¹, despite such mining not currently being legal. Indeed, on average, there are more permit applications targeting Indigenous territories where uncontacted people live than territories with only contacted Indigenous peoples¹³². Mining companies have officially registered their interest in mining in half of the officially recognized Indigenous territories in Brazil where uncontacted peoples live — a total of 25 territories, that are collectively home to 43 different uncontacted groups¹³³. Most at risk are the 21 groups of uncontacted Indigenous people in whose territories the vast majority of requests are concentrated — 50 or more requests per territory — signifying potential invasion and exploitation on a massive scale. More than 80 percent of the Xikrin do Cateté Indigenous territory, where a group of unknown uncontacted Indigenous people live, is being targeted by mining companies. These mining requests go hand-in-hand with political and legislative efforts to remove legal barriers

to mining on Indigenous land without consent, constituting a massive invasion on two fronts.

The Yanomami territories in Brazil and Venezuela are home to up to 13 uncontacted groups of Yanomami. The Brazilian part of the territory has by far the most mining requests of any Indigenous Territory in Brazil: more than 1,000. But even if no mining is ever officially approved, the Yanomami are already being devastated by gold mining. This unsanctioned mining is not just individuals sneaking in to pan for gold. Increasingly, it is run and funded by criminal organizations on an industrial scale, using huge dredgers, hydraulic excavators, high-pressure hoses and mercury that poisons the rivers and the fish that are a core part of the Indigenous people's diet.

“

There were many, many *garimpeiros* [miners] and they began to bring disease, measles and more measles. People fell ill. They had sore tongues, they were vomiting, so the *Waiãpi* began to run away. The *garimpeiros* didn't care. They wanted to finish off the *Waiãpi*. The *garimpeiros* just kept on arriving. A lot of *Waiãpi* died. The *Waiãpi* died of chicken pox, flu and measles. I remember all that.”

Joapirea Waiãpi (Wajãpi), Brazil, to Survival, 1998

Survival has for years been highlighting the genocide of the Yanomami people driven by a gold rush.¹³⁴ The problems have worsened since 2016, and especially during the Bolsonaro presidency from 2019 to 2022, when his administration backed the miners while dismantling the Indigenous health service. The miners brought diseases, including COVID-19; poisoned rivers and people with mercury; destroyed much of the forest; and unleashed brutal violence. Among contacted Yanomami, 570 children aged under 5 died of preventable diseases in just the four years of the Bolsonaro presidency¹³⁵. Between 2019 and 2020, Yanomami children were dying of malnutrition at a rate nearly 200 times higher than the national average¹³⁶. The number of uncontacted Yanomami people dying is of course unknown — but we do know that goldminers are operating on uncontacted Yanomami peoples' territory, and even built an illegal airstrip very close to the uncontacted Yanomami Moxihatëtëa. Miners filmed themselves flying over the homes of uncontacted people, who fired arrows towards them. In early 2023, the incoming Lula government began to take action, but not enough has been done to stem the humanitarian disaster, with many illegal mining camps still active, health posts barely functioning, and rates of disease and violence still sky high.¹³⁷

The Yanomami are not alone. Illegal miners have invaded the lands of at least 50 uncontacted Indigenous groups in the Brazilian Amazon. In the Munduruku Indigenous Territory, widespread mercury contamination of rivers from illegal gold mining is poisoning contacted Indigenous people, especially children — and is inevitably doing the same to the uncontacted Indigenous people who live in this area¹³⁸.

“

Acting on lies, pariwat [non-Indigenous] goldminers and politicians are exploiting our home and our territory without consulting us. We Munduruku are one nation, 14,000 people strong, and our territory is unique. Karosakaybu and our ancestors left this inheritance to us to care for, a place for us to live and raise our children. We do not support the laws and projects that threaten us.”

Letter from leaders of the Munduruku, who share their territory with uncontacted people, Brazil, October 2019

This extends beyond Brazil: illegal miners have invaded 370 territories belonging to Indigenous communities in the Amazon as a whole¹³⁹, dumping heavy metals into at least 30 Amazonian rivers. In Venezuela, the Indigenous territories where there is mining are losing forest at up to twice the rate of other territories¹⁴⁰, and Survival International's research shows that all the known uncontacted peoples are in danger from mining on or around their land. It is also a threat to half the uncontacted peoples in Bolivia, as well as some in Peru. In these countries deforestation is three times higher in Indigenous territories with mining.¹⁴¹ In Colombia, illegal gold mining threatens the survival of the only two officially recognized uncontacted peoples, the Yuri and Passé (see chapter 7). In 2022, satellite images showed dredgers and illegal miners in the Puré river just 10km from the uncontacted peoples' houses.

The uncontacted Hongana Manyawa on the Indonesian island of Halmahera are at urgent risk of being wiped out by a massive and growing nickel and cobalt mining project on their land, part of the Indonesia-wide “nickel rush”. While violating international law, this mining is generally fully licensed — encompassing at least 19 approved mining concessions on the uncontacted people’s territory — and is being driven by the Indonesian government. Much of the Hongana Manyawa’s territory is now occupied by the world’s biggest nickel mine, Weda Bay Nickel (WBN). Survival’s mapping of the region revealed that 85 percent of WBN’s concession is on uncontacted Hongana Manyawa territory in the forested interior of Halmahera, where an estimated 500 uncontacted Hongana Manyawa live.¹⁴² Since 1998, huge areas of their territory have been allocated to mining companies, including WBN, who have since been mining, destroying and polluting their forest at an increasing rate. Video footage of uncontacted people, taken by loggers and mineworkers from 2016 onwards, reveals how far mining and its accompanying destruction are encroaching into the home of the uncontacted Hongana Manyawa.¹⁴³

Survival discovered that researchers commissioned by WBN drew up plans to forcibly contact the uncontacted Hongana Manyawa as part of efforts to secure their Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC).¹⁴⁴ This plan is both murderously irresponsible and self-defeating: FPIC cannot be secured through forced contact, as established in international law (see chapter 7). The nickel — being mined and processed by French, Indonesian and Chinese companies — is intended to be sold for electric car batteries. A supposedly sustainable industry is driving the destruction of the Hongana Manyawa’s rainforest, and the likely genocide of these uncontacted people who live one of the most sustainable ways of life on earth.

In Indonesian-occupied West Papua, uncontacted people are also threatened by mining. Illegal mining of gold around uncontacted people’s territories is exposing them to deforestation, mercury poisoning and disease. In some areas in both West Papua and Indonesia, there is a fear that unsanctioned mining will pave the way for the mainstream mining industry, with companies believing they have free rein to mine on territories while the government fails even to recognize the existence of uncontacted peoples. Already, as in Brazil, the illegal mining is bringing devastation on an industrial scale — in 2018, an illegal gold mine on Korowai territory was found to have 3,000 workers and up to 10 helipads¹⁴⁵ — bringing huge exposure to disease. One local health authority estimated around 60 Korowai people are dying from disease every year¹⁴⁶; the impact on the uncontacted Korowai cannot be measured but is likely to be devastating.



TESTIMONY

Ngigoro, Hongana Manyawa, Indonesia

Ngigoro is a Hongana Manyawa man who was born uncontacted in the forest on Halmahera Island, Indonesia, and later left the forest. He is a powerful advocate for those Hongana Manyawa people who continue to live uncontacted in the forest. His testimony is drawn from interviews with Survival in 2024.

“My family have lived here in the rainforest since the time of our ancestors. After my father Dulada died in 1971, we had to leave the rainforest. I was 12 and my sisters were 11 and 10.

“I struggled to adjust to this new life because I longed for the rainforest. The thing I missed most was being connected to nature and how free I used to be. There is so much freedom in the rainforest.

“When I first came back to the rainforest I felt so connected to the forest, and I wanted to stay, but I was already married and had two children, so I was torn. But I kept coming back to visit.



Ngigoro, a Hongana Manyawa elder standing in front of one small part of Eramet's Weda Bay Nickel mine, which has destroyed his territory. His uncontacted relatives have fled deeper into the rainforest to escape the mining.
© Sophie Grig/Survival International

“Weda Bay Nickel started exploring in our rainforest in the 1990s, but the effects were not as massive back then. In 2018, when we protested against Weda Bay Nickel, I only saw two excavators in the area. But when we came back in 2020 there were so many more bulldozers and excavators. I cried. I was so sad when they destroyed the rainforest.

“I don’t want this. I don’t want my friends inside the forest [uncontacted Hongana Manyawa] to be tortured. ... The uncontacted Hongana Manyawa really hate the noises the company’s machinery makes. So that’s why they threaten the machines with spears to show that they are angry.

“Now they are suffering. They are tormented. The rivers are also covered up. Their places to live have been destroyed. They are really being tortured now... [The companies] make people the same as animals.

“This rainforest is our home, it’s where we live. [Weda Bay Nickel] has been destroying our rainforest and this is all that is left. We will not give our land to anybody. This is the rainforest that our parents and ancestors have been living in. This place is ours. We will not let you take our land from us. Stop stealing it from us. We won’t let it happen.

“If you want to buy nickel from a mining company, please first ask where it’s from.

“If it comes from Ake Jira in Halmahera, then please don’t buy it.”

5.3 Drug trafficking

“

One day, we came here and left our territory because the coca growers entered our lands. When we were living in our territory, it was more peaceful. ... When [our] families came here, they died. Mothers, fathers, uncles, grandchildren — they died. ... Then after that, the rapes started happening. We didn’t know what rape was before. ... We haven’t done anything to deserve this.”

Alex Tinyú, a Nukak man whose family was forced into contact and out of the forest by the drug trade and other invaders when he was a child, Colombia, to Survival, 2022

“

The region’s uncontacted Indigenous people, the true owners of this piece of Amazonia, have nothing to do with this. And it will certainly be them, once again, who will pay the highest price for the invasion of their lands by a group of traffickers and who knows what else.”

José Carlos Meirelles, Brazilian official present during an attack by a suspected drug gang, 2011

Drug trafficking threatens a third of uncontacted peoples in the Amazon, exposing them to violence and disease, and destroying their forest. The gangs involved in drug trafficking are also responsible for a huge amount of other criminal activity — particularly mining and logging — and their impact has been growing in recent decades. These gangs are also behind murders of Indigenous people and their allies in the area.

Violent criminal gangs transporting drugs and other goods through the Amazon are an increasing threat to all the Indigenous peoples in and around the border regions between Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela and Bolivia. Uncontacted peoples and their territories are at particular risk.

The areas where they live — deep in the Amazon, where rivers and streams converge — are particularly attractive for drug traffickers and criminal gangs who make use of interconnecting river routes and the lack of permanent surveillance. As a result, uncontacted peoples are increasingly in the path of the surging criminal activity linked to drug trafficking¹⁴⁷.

The problem in Brazil is not new, but it has grown dramatically in recent decades along with demand for recreational drugs in industrialized countries¹⁴⁸. Drug gangs like the First Command of the Capital (PCC) and Red Commando (CV) are very active in the Brazilian states of Amazonas — bordering Colombia, Peru and Venezuela — Pará and Roraima¹⁴⁹, which between them are home to almost two thirds of Brazil’s uncontacted groups¹⁵⁰. On the Colombian side of the border, some Maku groups and the Marahua, Yuri, and Passé uncontacted people all live in areas invaded by drug traffickers, as do the peoples of the Javari Valley in Brazil on the border with Peru, and others further into Peru. “The same tractor that is used to open the road to haul the timber felled in the forest is used to open the runway where the airplane carrying the drugs will land,” explains Francisco Piyäko of the Ashaninka people, whose territory in both Peru and Brazil is now being invaded by drug trafficking.

Most of the cultivation of coca — for making cocaine — in the Amazon occurs in Peru¹⁵¹. The Kakataibo Indigenous Reserve, home to both contacted and uncontacted Indigenous people, is surrounded and invaded by coca plantations, cocaine processing laboratories and illegal airstrips. Indigenous resistance has been met with intimidation and violence. In July 2024, Indigenous leader Mariano Isacama Feliciano was found dead following threats from drug traffickers.

The dangers for uncontacted Indigenous peoples are huge. Because this is all criminal activity, secrecy is routine and there is little official record of encounters with — or attacks

on — uncontacted people. Risks include disease, scaring off game, destroying the forest, and of course violence. The drug traffickers are not just passing through: they target remote areas to build roads, airstrips, refueling points and even militarized bases in the forest that uncontacted people live in and rely on. They are driving a huge surge of what the United Nations now calls “narco-deforestation”¹⁵². Brazilian officials¹⁵³ who monitor and protect uncontacted peoples’ land report that uncontacted peoples are being driven out of some of the areas where they usually travel or plant gardens — in a clear effort to escape the traffickers. The worst effects are probably still hidden.

In 2011, a Brazilian government Protection Base in Envira, built to monitor and protect the area occupied by uncontacted Indigenous people, was attacked by an armed criminal gang from Peru. Military police were sent in to secure the site and rescue the base’s employees. A piece of an arrow like those typically used by uncontacted peoples was found among the attackers’ belongings, intensifying fears of a previous violent clash with isolated Indigenous people.

The lucrative drug trade is also strongly linked to other wildly destructive and illegal trades in the Amazon — notably mining and logging — turbo-charging the destruction. A UN report from late 2023 noted that “organized criminal groups, which have traditionally focused on drug production and trafficking, are diversifying into highly profitable activities related to crimes that affect the environment”, noting the disproportionate impact on Indigenous peoples¹⁵⁴. In both Brazil and Venezuela, drug trafficking cartels are now deeply involved with or closely linked to illegal mining — so-called ‘narco-mining’.

The cartels protect their lucrative illegal activity, including mining, with militarized security. Armed PCC militias support illegal gold miners operating inside the Yanomami territory in Roraima, home to several uncontacted groups. The Hutukara

Yanomami Association reports that mine workers are now masked, carry heavier weapons including machine guns, and are increasingly aggressive and violent¹⁵⁵.

Drug trafficking has also become an important source of funds for armed guerilla groups. Colombia’s National Liberation Army (ELN) is involved in illegal mining, drug trafficking and extortion in Venezuela. Venezuelan organization ODEVIDA has recorded the murders of 32 Indigenous and environmental leaders, 21 of them killed by illegal miners, members of Colombian guerilla groups and the Venezuelan armed forces. Virgilio Trujillo Aranaknew, an Indigenous Uwottuja man who helped guard the forest where uncontacted people live, was murdered in 2022.

The 2022 murders of Bruno Pereira, pro-Indigenous activist and former head of FUNAI’s uncontacted and recently contacted Indigenous unit, and journalist Dom Phillips in Brazil’s Javari Valley — the area with the greatest concentration of uncontacted Indigenous peoples in the world — exposed the vulnerability of Indigenous territories in the midst of a region dominated by crime. A Peruvian known as ‘Colômbia’ — among various other aliases — who the police say is involved in drug trafficking and illegal fishing in the region, has been charged with orchestrating the murders.

Without serious action against the drug traffickers and their criminal activities — including and far beyond the drug trade itself — a huge proportion of the uncontacted peoples of the Amazon could be wiped out.

TESTIMONY

Kolaleene, the Enawene Nawe people, Brazil

Kolaleene spoke to Survival in 2008 about his family's horrific experience of contact with violent rubber tappers in the Brazilian Amazon.

“That was the place where we first noted the presence of non-Indigenous people. We were hunting *nambu* birds, and we saw a rubber tree with lines cut into it [to collect rubber]. We thought, ‘Who could have done this? Maybe *iñoti* [non-Indigenous people] did this. We were very shocked and scared by that. We went home to discuss it.

“We saw the path made by the *iñoti*, a long path. We went and saw that straight, very well-made path. So we came and we examined the way they had cut the wood. It must be *iñoti*, we thought. At Hawinawali [headwaters of the Aripuanã river], in an old community, we found four axes. We took the axes.

“Then we came here and my mother was hurt — they shot my mother. There were two women in the group, and they shot

them with guns. They shot my mother with guns. They shot Honolokwaiti, the woman who was walking at the front.

“My mother was behind, Honolokwaiti was in the front, and they were walking in a line. There was one here and another there. That was when they shot — bang! Honolokwaiti died. She was an older woman.

“They shot my mother too. She ran and hid. The attackers went to look for her — they looked, but she hid well.

“When the others heard the noise of the weapon — bang! — they also ran away. After a while the others came back to check what had happened. They saw that there was a woman hanging from ropes. She was an Enawene Nawe woman. She was hanging like that, upside down. She was dead. She was shot multiple times in the head, face, arms and legs.

“She was an older woman like you [the Survival researcher]. When we saw her, we were very sad. We went to a different place and we made a new village.”



The Enawene Nawe live in large malocas, or communal houses, made of wood and thatch. These are built in a circle extending from ‘the house of the sacred flutes’ in the center. © Fiona Watson/Survival International

5.4 Agribusiness

“

The Awá are very threatened and they are surrounded by pesticides. The cattle ranchers are polluting the water they drink. If the uncontacted Awá are not protected they will disappear. They are the most vulnerable people on the planet. We are very worried.”

Olimpio Guajajara, one of the Guajajara Guardians who defend the territory of the uncontacted Awá, Brazil, to Survival 2025

“

The Piripkura Indigenous Territory is being rapidly transformed into an immense pasture for cattle herds.”

Report by ISA, Opi, COIAB & Survival International, 2021

*Image taken during an overflight of the Piripkura territory, showing incursions by land-grabbers, loggers and ranchers. 2021.
© Rogério Assis-ISA*



Agribusiness threatens around a quarter of all uncontacted Indigenous peoples. It includes cattle ranching in the Amazon and the Paraguayan and Bolivian Chaco, as well as oil palm plantations in Asia and the Pacific. All of these are major drivers of deforestation, and destroy uncontacted Indigenous peoples' homes and livelihoods.

Cattle ranching is the primary driver of deforestation in both the Paraguayan Chaco¹⁵⁶ and the Brazilian Amazon¹⁵⁷. This has fatal consequences for the uncontacted peoples who live there.

The forests surrounding the territory of the Ayoreo Totobiegosode in Paraguay have already been destroyed by ranchers, posing an urgent threat to their survival. The core of their land — where uncontacted Ayoreo live — is in the hands of five agribusiness companies, from Paraguay and other South American countries, that are rapidly destroying it: Yaguareté Porã, Carlos Casado, River Plate, BBC S.A., and Itapoti. They lay waste to the forest using enormous chains drawn between bulldozers, cutting a devastating path. Although the whole area is recognized as the Ayoreo's ancestral land, they only have official title to small patches of it, with the rest carved up between these five companies — whose plans include bulldozing most of the uncontacted Ayoreo's land to create cattle ranches.

“

While I could hear the noise, I was thinking I was going to kill the bulldozer with my spear. We all crouched down like this...We thought you could kill a bulldozer, so we were looking at its flanks to see how to kill it. But it was getting dark, and the bulldozer was going towards our house. We didn't want to leave our house, as the soil there was very good...I saw Ojai throw his spear at the bulldozer...I threw my spear. It made a noise that was strange to us as it hit the metal sides. I looked around to see if the others were next to me, they were all still alive. I had to run because I had no other weapons.”

Esoi Chiquenoi, an Ayoreo man first contacted in 2004, Paraguay, speaking to Survival in 2007

Deforestation and cattle ranch invasions also threaten the uncontacted Indigenous people of the Piripkura Indigenous territory in Brazil.¹⁵⁸ From 1988 to 2021, an area¹⁵⁹ larger than the city of San Francisco was deforested in this territory, with an estimated 7 million trees felled — and it has been picking up speed. The cleared land is used for cattle ranching, as confirmed by over-flights showing huge ranches, cattle, roads, trucks, tractors and an airstrip¹⁶⁰. Between July and September 2021, an area containing about 1.3 million trees was burned, almost certainly deliberately, opening it up to grazing while posing a

huge risk to the uncontacted Piripkura people who depend on their forest for survival.

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples in Asia and the Pacific are threatened by the lucrative boom in oil palm and rubber industries, major drivers of deforestation in the region¹⁶¹. Both contacted and uncontacted Korowai people in West Papua are threatened with oil palm companies reported to have been trying to enter the territories of the Korowai and Kombai peoples. In Indonesia, rubber and palm oil plantations threaten the forest of an Indigenous people, of whom some live without contact.¹⁶²



This house belonged to an uncontacted Ayoreo family. It was discovered as it lay right in the path of a bulldozer clearing their forest for cattle ranching. The next day the bulldozer returned and flattened the house. © Survival International



TESTIMONY

Wamaxuá Awá, Brazil

Wamaxuá Awá first came into contact with outsiders in 2009. Two years later, after leaving the forest and living among contacted Awá people in Maranhão state, eastern Brazil, he spoke to Survival.

“[The first time I saw contacted Awá], I was hunting and wanted to kill an agouti [rodent]. I had already grown a little, but I was still small. ... I was hunting, and I saw the [contacted] Awá in the garden. ... I went over and they saw me. I saw them and I thought: “They are Awá! It can’t be!” I was small and I was scared.

“I went back into the forest where I grew up. I grew up eating turtle and agouti mixed with babaçu palm nuts and inajá (fruit). I used to hunt capuchin monkeys and I ate honey and other foods from the forest.

“Then one day I went back [to that area] with three other Awá from my community, and we saw [contacted] Awá people again. And I spoke with all of them. We stayed a few days [in the contacted Awá village], but then the three who came with me

did not want to stay. They went back to live in the forest. They still live there.

“Non-Indigenous people have been in the forest for a while, cutting down trees. We used to walk in the forest and see that they had passed through. The first time I saw them, I was still little. My father was very scared of the non-Indigenous people.

“The non-Indigenous people are still in the forest! They are taking too long to leave, they have been moving around for a long time. Unfortunately, they are still destroying the forest. It’s terrible! I’m very worried.

“[Uncontacted] Awá are still living in the forest. They hunt monkeys at night to keep hidden. They live while fleeing from the non-Indigenous people — they find their tracks and escape from them, because they are scared. They break babaçu nuts and cut trees quietly, so no-one notices they are there. They kill caymans and other game at night. Sometimes they are hungry during the daytime. I know because I have lived in the forest. Before coming here, I went through all that in the forest.

“What will become of them, my brothers who still live there? They’ll probably continue to escape.

“We were scared of the loggers when we lived in the forest and still now, living here, I still fear their presence. They are going to destroy our forest.”

Wamaxuá Awá (left) in Caru Indigenous Territory. © Sarah Shenker/Survival International



5.5 Oil and Gas

“

Oil creates problems in the village. They threw a pump, used a drum in the water of the stream. That's why I'm scared. [It brought] serious illness, Indians with big bellies, vomiting blood, tuberculosis. Anacuá, Uaçá, Rosa, Maria died. They all died like that.”

Tumi Cashipi, Matsés survivor of 1980s Petrobras oil exploration, Brazil, 2014

Oil and gas drilling poses a very serious threat to around 10 percent of uncontacted peoples in the Amazon, concentrated in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Brazil. These governments continue to welcome the oil and gas industry, despite a history of killing uncontacted peoples, and many warnings about the current risks.

Oil and gas exploration in the Amazon has been violent and deadly for uncontacted Indigenous peoples. In the 1980s, oil exploration by the Brazilian company Petrobras in the Javari Valley brought disease, conflict and death to the region with the highest concentration of uncontacted Indigenous people in the world. At the same time, exploration by Shell in Peru led to contact with the uncontacted Nahua tribe, with devastating results — the contact killed about half of the Nahua within a few years.

“

They all died. My uncle and cousins died as they were walking... they started to cough, they got sick and died right there in the forest. Some were small children. They put all the bodies in a big hole and everyone was wailing and crying.”

Shocorua, Nahua survivor of Shell oil exploration, Peru, speaking to Survival in 1997

Yet lessons have not been learned. All the known uncontacted peoples in Ecuador — the Tagaeri, the Taromenane and the Dugakaeri — are at risk from oil and gas exploration devastating their land (see case study), as are almost all of those in Bolivia. In 2014, Petrobras began exploration in the southern Brazilian Amazon¹⁶³, in an area that is home to numerous uncontacted and recently contacted peoples, despite the clear dangers. The government's own Indigenous Affairs department (FUNAI) was not consulted. Petrobras is now proposing to drill

in the Foz do Amazonas basin, with the full support of President Lula, despite a potentially deadly impact on uncontacted and other Indigenous peoples, and vocal opposition from Indigenous and ally organizations. Writer and Indigenous activist Ailton Krenak described the plan as ‘inconceivable’, commenting that, “It’s scandalous that anyone would even think of drilling another oil well.” At least two uncontacted groups in the area would be at severe risk — the peoples of Rio Katxapakuru/Igarapé Água Fria, and the Pitinga/Nhamundá-Mapuera¹⁶⁴.

An uncontacted people in Brazil of whose presence outsiders have only recently become aware is highly threatened by gas drilling. The group, in the Uatumã River region, was first seen by chance by members of the non-profit Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) in 2023, and further indications of their presence were found by a subsequent FUNAI expedition. The uncontacted people — whose identity and language are still unknown — live only around 30km from oil and gas exploration blocks owned by the Brazilian company Eneva. In late 2024, the Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office recommended “immediate suspension” of the gas exploration and nearby logging, and a ban on activity in the area. But as of the publication of this report, none of this had been done, and the uncontacted people remain at high risk.

More than 70 percent of the Peruvian Amazon has been leased by the government to oil companies. This includes regions inhabited by five different uncontacted Indigenous peoples. Peru’s largest gas field, Camisea, lies inside an Indigenous reserve that is home to the Nahua, as well as Nanti and Matsigenka Indigenous people who are uncontacted or in initial contact. The field has been appalling for Indigenous peoples in the area¹⁶⁵, and has been strongly opposed by Peruvian Indigenous organizations including AIDSEP, FENAMAD, COMARU and ORAU, including for its impact on uncontacted



Peru’s Kugapakori-Nahua-Nanti Reserve is home to both recently-contacted and uncontacted people, including the Nanti and Kugapakori. © Glenn Shepard/Survival International

peoples¹⁶⁶. Long-discussed plans to expand the gas field would make this even worse — indeed, a Peruvian government report noted that the Nanti could be made “extinct” if Camisea expanded¹⁶⁷.

Yet the Peruvian government has an “open door” policy for foreign investment in the oil and gas sector¹⁶⁸, and continues to promote and support oil and gas exploration on Indigenous territories. The creation of the Napo-Tigre Indigenous Reserve has been delayed by opposition of the powerful hydrocarbon lobby. The government actively encourages companies to explore in areas inhabited by uncontacted tribes — including the Aewa, the Taushiro, the Záparo and the Isconahua — even though such activity could cause their genocide.



CASE STUDY

Tagaeri, Taromenane and Dugakaeri peoples, Ecuador

The Yasuni National Park in the Ecuadorian Amazon is one of the most biodiverse areas on the planet. The park is home to several Indigenous peoples — including the uncontacted Tagaeri, Taromenane and Dugakaeri.

These peoples were subjected to a disastrous and deadly contact mission led by evangelical missionaries from the Summer Institute of Linguistics in 1953. In 1999, the Ecuadorian government finally created a No-Go Zone for them (the Zona Intangible Tagaeri-Taromenane, ZITT) within the Yasuni National Park. The No-Go Zone, covering more than 800,000 hectares, is legally recognized and protected as the territory of the uncontacted Indigenous people.

However, the park's natural resources — including the oil deposits deep underground — are also highly coveted. In the 1970s and '80s, a massive oil boom transformed the Ecuadorian economy and attracted companies and investors to the region. Oil blocks border the No-Go Zone on all sides, and to the

north, several blocks (blocks 14, 16, 31, and 43) overlap with areas crucial to the survival of the uncontacted inhabitants. The presence of outsiders in their territory; constant noise of generators and machinery; huge gas flares, visible from kilometers away; and pollution of rivers and soil are putting extreme stress on the territory and the Indigenous people, forcing them out of their home, into conflict and even killing them.

At the beginning of the 21st century, oil companies' attacks were compounded by a wave of illegal logging, triggering the massacre of 25 uncontacted people in 2003. The clashes have continued — happening again in 2009, 2013, and 2016. The 2003 massacre eventually led to a historic case against Ecuador at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, in which the court judged that the state was responsible for failing to protect the uncontacted Indigenous people. (See also chapter 7.)

There are clear indications that some isolated Indigenous families living outside the Zone have also been driven from their homes. The Zone does not cover the whole of the uncontacted peoples' territories, and this has been acknowledged by both Ecuador's Constitutional Court and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

In August 2023, Ecuadorian society decided in a historic referendum that Block 43 should be completely dismantled and the oil remain in the ground indefinitely — this is a huge victory for the rights of the uncontacted Indigenous people. Yet the other blocks continue to operate, continuing to put the uncontacted Indigenous people in Yasuni in grave danger.

5.6 Tourism, influencers and ‘entertainment’

“

An arrest has been made of [a] US National for Unauthorized Visit to North Sentinel Island ... Investigation revealed that the accused ... had intentionally visited the restricted North Sentinel Island in an attempt to interact with the Sentinelese tribe. His actions posed a serious threat to the safety and well-being of the Sentinelese people, whose contact with outsiders is strictly prohibited by law to protect their indigenous way of life. Moreover, [he] disclosed that he was drawn to the island due to his passion for adventure and his desire to undertake extreme challenges. He was particularly fascinated by the mystique of the Sentinelese people.”

Andaman and Nicobar Police, press release, April 2025

Some anthropologists, filmmakers, tourists and — increasingly — social media influencers fetishize and seek out contact with uncontacted peoples. While it is hard to quantify the threat — not least because claims of ‘contact’ do not always stand up to scrutiny — it is a concern in Asia and the Pacific in particular, and encourages reckless behavior that has killed uncontacted people and could do so again.

The apparent thrill of getting close to uncontacted peoples — or at least to the stereotyped ideas of uncontacted peoples — and making ‘first contact’ has long lured some anthropologists and documentary filmmakers. A number have deliberately sought out uncontacted people as an object of study, or in order to capture ‘first encounters’ on film, seemingly without thought for the potentially devastating consequences. In 1971, British broadcaster David Attenborough joined an Australian colonial government patrol in Papua New Guinea in an attempt to contact and film uncontacted Indigenous people for the BBC documentary “A Blank on the Map”. It showed the moment of an alleged first contact with the Biami people — a reckless encounter which could easily have passed on deadly pathogens to which the Biami had no immunity. In 2008, the Peruvian authorities stated that a British TV company had illegally sought out uncontacted and recently contacted Matsigenka Indigenous people in Peru, while filming a TV show called “World’s Lost Tribes”. FENAMAD, the local Indigenous organization, reported that the crew provoked a respiratory disease epidemic that left four people dead.¹⁶⁹

Tourism has expanded the threat from a small number of academics or documentary makers to a potential mass market of those seeking to ‘encounter’ uncontacted Indigenous people. The influx of tourists to the Manu National Park in Peru, for example, has been highly dangerous for the uncontacted Mashco Piro, and prompted serious concern from Indigenous organizations.

There are unscrupulous tour operators looking to make money from tourists who are desperate to encounter uncontacted or recently contacted peoples. This includes those offering ‘First Contact expeditions’ among Indigenous peoples in West Papua and Indonesia, although these are usually scams, with Indigenous locals paid to dress up and pose. In the 1970s and ’80s, a road was bulldozed through the territory of the then-uncontacted Ang (known at the time as the Jarawa) on the Andaman Islands. Since the early 2000s, tourists have flocked along the completed road to embark on “human safaris”. One tourist described his experience as “like a safari ride” in which the tourists were “looking for wild animals, Jarawa tribals to be specific.” One Ang boy lost his arm after being lured onto the road by tourists throwing food towards him from a moving vehicle¹⁷⁰. In 2012, disturbing footage went viral of a police officer filmed ordering Ang people to dance¹⁷¹, throwing them food in exchange. Survival and local organizations campaigned against these human safaris¹⁷² and the practice is now officially banned. Yet the road remains open in defiance of a Supreme Court ruling that it be closed, and tourists still travel on the road trying to “spot” the Ang.

Social media has expanded this threat. Some influencers claim that they’ve made contact with uncontacted peoples, or they express their intention to do so. Self-proclaimed “adventurers” and “explorers” travel to the Amazon, the Indian Ocean and New Guinea, photographing local Indigenous people — often



Bus travels along the Andaman Trunk Road through the Ang reserve.
© Ariberto De Blasoni/Survival International

dressed up to look more ‘exotic’ — while making extravagant claims about having “contacted” them. The Sentinelese, who live alone and without contact on North Sentinel Island, are a particular subject of fascination — there are more than 10,000 posts with the hashtag #northsentinelisland on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube. Viral posts bring their creators much-coveted attention and potentially revenue, making this yet another form of extractive commerce that endangers uncontacted peoples, while encouraging ever greater appetite for photos and images of uncontacted people and ‘first contact’ encounters.

This is not frivolous. In April 2025, an American would-be social media influencer made his way to North Sentinel Island,



where he failed to encounter any Sentinelese, before being arrested by the police for illegal entry to the island. This is the latest example of how reckless individuals are willing to risk killing Indigenous people in pursuit of contact, pictures and videos of uncontacted peoples. This violates uncontacted peoples' rights to self-determination, autonomy and refusal of contact with outsiders, and risks exposure to disease, a lethal threat to individuals and to entire communities. It contributes to the racist stereotype of uncontacted Indigenous peoples as exotic and primitive, a dehumanizing image that has helped smooth the way for repeated violations of their rights over hundreds of years.

There can be reasons to draw attention to the existence of uncontacted people, including by releasing photos and videos. FUNAI, the Brazilian government Indigenous Affairs department, has often done this when attempting to combat claims by politicians, loggers, cattle ranchers or other land grabbers that an area of rainforest is empty of Indigenous inhabitants. Survival has done the same — often in partnership with or at the request of local Indigenous organizations — to build concern about the threats facing specific uncontacted peoples. Raising awareness of the existence of uncontacted peoples, and pointing out the threats facing them, is vital. But uncontacted peoples are not living 'entertainment' for others, and their lives and rights cannot carelessly be exchanged for likes on TikTok or subscriptions to YouTube channels.

Hundreds of vehicles still travel along the Andaman Trunk Road through the Ang reserve, in defiance of a Supreme Court order that it be closed. © www.andamanchronicle.net/Survival

CASE STUDY



The Korowai people, West Papua

The Korowai are one of up to ten peoples in West Papua who are believed to include uncontacted groups or families. They live in the swampy rainforest of the Anim-Ha region. West Papua as a whole is under Indonesian military occupation and most foreign journalists, humanitarian organizations and even UN officials are refused entry into West Papua.

And yet, successive Indonesian governments have allowed scores of Indonesian and foreign filmmakers and tour companies to visit the Korowai and their neighbors — typically misrepresenting them as being “stone age” or “cannibals”. Some tour operators have arranged supposed first contact expeditions for foreign tourists. The visits put the Korowai at serious risk of disease and encourage visits to other uncontacted peoples. The Indonesian government does not allow foreign journalists to cover the human rights situation in West Papua, yet it encourages film crews and tour operators to misrepresent Indigenous West Papuan lives for “entertainment” — with potentially dire consequences.



A Korowai man with his bow and arrows, West Papua. © David Hill/Survival International

The Korowai, famed for their striking treehouses, were first contacted by outsiders in the 1970s. Indonesian government officials tried rapidly to assimilate and strip them of their identity, as they had with other previously uncontacted groups. In the 1990s, the government tried to force the Korowai to settle in state-built villages, and accused those living in the rainforest of being affiliated with the banned West Papuan Independence movement. The accusations (accompanied by threats) effectively forced many Korowai to leave their rainforest home.

The Korowai now also face widespread illegal gold mining on their territory and are extremely vulnerable to its devastating effects — deforestation and mercury poisoning risk major environmental and health crises. The mining is also rapidly heightening the Korowai's exposure to outside diseases, and it's estimated that around 60 Korowai are now dying from disease every year. Given this, as well as traumatic previous government settlement attempts and interactions with outsiders, recent reports that several Korowai families have returned to the rainforest and are shunning contact are unsurprising. In 2025, Korowai representatives were among dozens of West Papuan tribes who formally called for an international boycott of Indonesian products until the Indonesian government finally respects West Papuans' right to self-determination.

6. Mass deaths and genocides

“

If our people suffered a lot, imagine them! We think they must have a small population, and the outside world can wipe out their whole population. That's why we want to protect them. They are human. They are meant to live there. So we can't let anyone kill them. That's our intention, that's why we do our work there for them.”

Ewepe Marcelo and other Kinja (Waimiri Atroari) leaders, Brazil, 2019¹⁷³

Historical genocides and mass killings of Indigenous peoples — including uncontacted peoples — are relatively well-known. Less well-known is that they continue today: often hidden, driven by varying weapons, but a severe and immediate danger.

Over the last five centuries, there have been countless genocides and mass killings of Indigenous peoples, mainly at the hands of European states and colonists who invaded Africa, Asia, Australia, the Pacific and the Americas. Many of the stories of murderous conquest and colonization are well documented and well known, described in books and taught in schools.

Contemporary genocides and mass deaths of uncontacted Indigenous peoples have some possibly surprising characteristics — they are often hidden, they can range in manner from brutally direct to chillingly indirect, and they are frequent and current. Right now, companies, governments and others are taking actions that could lead to the total destruction of uncontacted peoples, killing whole families and communities and leaving perhaps only a few grieving and traumatized survivors.

The term ‘genocide’ was coined in 1944 by the Polish jurist and Holocaust survivor Raphael Lemkin, who pushed the United Nations for an international law against genocide. The UN subsequently adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948. It defines genocide as “acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical (sic), racial or religious group”. It is notoriously difficult to prove ‘intent’ in a court. Survival follows many genocide scholars in using a definition¹⁷⁴ that encompasses situations where perpetrators clearly know that their actions are likely to kill most or all of a population — and they go ahead anyway¹⁷⁵. All genocides and mass killings of uncontacted Indigenous peoples are crimes against humanity, and tragedies both for the individuals who must watch their loved ones die, and for humanity’s diversity.

6.1 Hidden genocides

Genocides and mass killings of Indigenous peoples — and especially uncontacted peoples — are under-reported, in part because they happen in extremely sparsely populated areas, far from law enforcement or the world’s media. There are few, if any, witnesses to these crimes, and survivors’ accounts may not surface until many years after the crimes take place, if ever. Even when survivors do come forward, their stories often do not attract media attention.

It was decades before the genocide of the Akuntsu became known to outsiders. From the 1970s, the Akuntsu in Brazil were subjected to waves of murderous attacks by gunmen clearing the forest of Indigenous people for cattle ranchers. By 1995, when the surviving Akuntsu met and told their stories to Brazilian government investigators, only seven of them remained.

Sixteen Yanomami were murdered in Haximu, Venezuela, in July 1993. A group of illegal gold miners attacked the community, which had very little contact with outsiders, using guns and machetes. The victims were mostly women, children and the elderly, as most of the men were not in the village at the time. A month later, on 25 August, the 69 survivors arrived at a Yanomami community a little way over the border in Brazil, holding gourds containing the ashes of their murdered kin, whom they had cremated according to Yanomami custom. It was only then that full details of the massacre emerged. Public prosecutors took up the case and in 1996, in a historic



ruling, Brazil's Superior Tribunal convicted five goldminers of genocide. Despite decades of such atrocities, this is one of only two genocide convictions in Brazil's history, both of Indigenous people with limited contact with outsiders.

Genocides of uncontacted Indigenous people do not stay hidden only because of a lack of confirmed details. Even when stories emerge, the victims do not capture media interest. When American missionary John Allen Chau was killed while recklessly attempting to evangelize the uncontacted Sentinelese in late 2018, it made headlines around the world for weeks, despite the lack of witnesses, and it is still spawning feature films and documentaries many years later. But when the Hutukara Yanomami Association reported murders of uncontacted Moxihatëtëa Indigenous people by illegal goldminers in both 2019 and 2020¹⁷⁶, and warned of a likely genocide if their activities continue unchecked¹⁷⁷, the world's media was quiet.

Inuteia, a young Akuntsu woman. Her necklace is made from plastic cut from barrels of pesticides discarded by neighbouring ranchers. © Fiona Watson/Survival International



CASE STUDY

The Last of his Tribe, Brazil

They found him lying at peace in his hammock, surrounded by bright-colored feathers, plucked from the birds he lived among in the Amazonian forest. His was a solitary death, one he'd likely prepared for. And it spelled the total destruction of his small tribe that had lived in and around the Tanaru Indigenous territory of Rondônia state in Brazil.

Known variously as the 'Last of his Tribe' and the 'Man of the Hole', he was found by a Brazilian government agent in August 2022. He died of natural causes after living alone in the Amazon for more than two decades. No one knows his full history, his language, his name — or the name of his people.

Some of his story can, nevertheless, be pieced together. His tribe were likely massacred by colonists, loggers and ranchers who invaded their territory from the 1970s onwards. To survive the attacks, he fled deeper into the forest; to live out his remaining days alone, hunting wild game, growing vegetables and fruits in small gardens dotted about the territory. He built houses of straw and thatch and dug deep holes inside. He dug

more holes out in the forest — perhaps to trap animals or to hide in.

This man's many years of living alone and resisting attempts at contact are testament to his resilience, and a powerful example of an Indigenous person exercising their right to live how they choose on their own land. To respect and uphold this right, the 8,000-hectare Tanaru territory — of which the Last of his Tribe was the sole inhabitant — was protected and monitored by FUNAI from at least 2006 onwards.

The official recognition and protection of his territory in the last decades of his life were crucial to his ability to survive and thrive in Tanaru for so long — even to the point of creating his own place of death. But had this been done sooner, his family and the rest of his people could have been spared their early deaths, and he might have lived out his last years with children and grandchildren around him, rather than alone in his forest.



"The Last of his Tribe" looks out from his hut — a still from the film Corumbiara, by Vincent Carelli. The man was believed to be the sole survivor of a tribe massacred by ranchers in the 1970s and 1980s. He died in 2022.
© Vincent Carelli/Video nas Aldeias

6.2 From bullets to bulldozers and bills

“

What is it like to be part of a people that for more than five hundred years has had people trying to kill it, to wipe out their existence ... This is a broader idea of genocide.... When we talk about a policy that will prevent, for example, health resources from reaching the community, this is genocide; we mean that there are direct ways to kill, and there are also ways to not let that people live.”

Felipe Tuxá, Brazil, to Survival, 2019

The wholesale destruction of a people conjures up images of brutal violence on a mass scale — and sometimes this is exactly what invaders unleash on uncontacted tribes. At other times, the means of attack is more indirect — perhaps even actions of contact or land theft that might be celebrated as ‘progress’ in church newsletters, corporate reports, or parliamentary motions. But it is nonetheless just as effective, and the perpetrators just as culpable.

The dominant historical form of genocide of uncontacted peoples — savage violence and knowing exposure to disease by armies, colonizers and missionaries — has continued well into the 20th and even into the 21st century. Survival was founded in 1969 in response to the Figueiredo Report, an official national report of systematic, brutal and genocidal violence and crimes against Indigenous peoples in Brazil — including uncontacted tribes. Entire communities were wiped out by explosives dropped from planes, ‘gifts’ of food laced with poison, or being hunted down with machine guns. This kind of violence is not just historical: the Hongana Manyawa in Indonesia and the Mashco Piro in Peru are regularly sought out or attacked by militias and armed loggers, respectively. Remaining uncontacted peoples in West Papua are at great risk from the brutal violence still regularly inflicted on the Indigenous population by the occupying Indonesian state.

But even amidst the violence, other instruments of murder and destruction have long been used. In 1980, Brazilian anthropologist, historian and former senator Darcy Ribeiro described Brazil’s Indigenous people as facing not only “dogs, snares, Winchesters, machine guns, napalm, arsenic, [and] clothes contaminated with smallpox” but also “false certificates, removal, deportations, highways, fences, fires, pastures, cattle, the decrees of law and the denial of facts.”¹⁷⁸ Today’s weapons against uncontacted peoples are often bulldozers or legislation rather than bombs or guns.

Companies such as Eramet, which is mining for nickel in the rainforest of the uncontacted Hongana Manyawa in Halmahera, Indonesia; or Carlos Casado, ranching on the lands of the uncontacted Ayoreo Totobiegosode in Paraguay; or Canales Tahuamanu, logging on the territory of the Mashco Piro in Peru, all describe their work in bland corporate terms. They talk about “responsible mining ... to meet the needs of the global energy

transition”¹⁷⁹, about “sustainability standards” and “integration with the community”¹⁸⁰. Yet when companies are operating on the territories of uncontacted peoples, and putting them in danger of contact, their actions are a human rights violation, against international law, and put peoples’ lives at risk.

Hiding behind Corporate Social Responsibility statements does not absolve companies of responsibility for potentially destroying isolated Indigenous peoples. The Genocide Convention states that genocide includes acts “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part”¹⁸¹. It is on this basis that, in February 2024, a group of 39 eminent genocide scholars from around the world wrote to the Indian government voicing their opinion that plans for a mega-development on the island of Great Nicobar, in the Indian Ocean, would amount to genocide of the uncontacted Shompen who live in the island’s rainforest. When commenting on corporate engagement in the massive nickel mining project on the land of the uncontacted Hongana Manyawa, genocide scholar Dr. Mark Levene argues that “there can be no mitigating plea of innocence when the protagonists know what the outcome will be”¹⁸². He asserts that even if a company does not intend to kill uncontacted people, if it nevertheless operates on uncontacted peoples’ land while being able to anticipate the impact, then the company’s “responsibility will not be at one remove from a genocidal outcome but a matter of direct and knowing responsibility”¹⁸³.

Even though murdering people with guns or poison is clearly illegal, in too many countries the means used to wipe out uncontacted Indigenous peoples are not just permitted under national laws, but backed by governments. Anti-Indigenous legal frameworks dramatically increase the risk of annihilation of uncontacted peoples by opening their land to further invasion and exploitation. Former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro

is accused of genocide¹⁸⁴ for his policies of shattering land protection and healthcare for Indigenous peoples, incentivizing invasions of Indigenous land, and stripping funding and support for protection of Indigenous territories, including those of uncontacted peoples.

These policies directly led to, for example, a catastrophic health crisis and deaths from violence, disease, malnutrition and poisoning among the Yanomami people, who include several uncontacted groups. Even after his term ended, anti-Indigenous politicians in the Brazilian Congress have continued this approach, passing law 14.701/2023 that rips up many of the legal protection for Indigenous land that are guaranteed in the Constitution and that are crucial for the survival of uncontacted Indigenous peoples. As Indigenous leader Célia Xakriabá said, “They didn’t manage to kill us all at the time of colonization, and they didn’t manage to get rid of us during the dictatorship. But now we are living through a moment of legislated genocide. They’re killing us with pen and paper. We Indigenous people do not die only when they kill our leaders. We die collectively when they take away our land.”¹⁸⁵

CASE STUDY

The Aché people, Paraguay

In the 1950s, '60s and '70s, dozens of Aché people were viciously hunted down in the hilly forests of eastern Paraguay.

It was one of the most shocking atrocities in the colonization of Indigenous lands in the 20th Century.

The Aché were nomadic hunter-gatherers, living without contact with outsiders. Their extensive territory was coveted by Paraguayan farmers and cattle ranchers — who saw the Aché as obstacles to their plans, rather than the rightful owners of the land. They mounted frequent raiding parties to capture the uncontacted Aché. When the attackers found an Aché group, they would kill most of the men, sparing only those who submitted immediately, and capture the women and children, who would subsequently be sold into slavery.

Colonel Manuel Jesús Pereira, an employee of the Department of Native Affairs (part of the Paraguayan Ministry of Defense), was one of the key figures behind the campaign, and a notorious enslaver.

His farm was supposedly an “Aché reservation” — but in fact it was more like a concentration camp. Captured Aché people were trucked to the reservation in army vehicles. Once there, beatings and rape were common. Girls under 12 were taken to live with Pereira; some were offered to his friends. Colonel Tristán Infanzón, then-director of the Department of Native Affairs, was a frequent visitor.

Control of the Aché reservation was given to the US-based fundamentalist missionary sect, the New Tribes Mission (NTM, now also known as Ethnos360), which colluded with the military regime and continued to round up uncontacted Aché groups and force them into camps to convert them.

In 1975, the writer Norman Lewis visited the NTM base and called it the “most sinister experience” of his life. He described the survivors of a recent manhunt: “One woman... was in a desperate condition with untreated wounds on her leg. A small, naked, tearful boy sat at her side... Two old ladies lying on some rags on the ground in the last stages of emaciation and clearly on the verge of death... there was no food or water in sight. The three women and the boy had been taken in a recent forest roundup, the third woman having been shot in the side while attempting to escape.”

Today, about 2,000 Aché people live in six communities which are neither contiguous nor fully protected, so disputes continue with farmers and other colonists.

In 2014, after generations of killing, enslavement and abuse, the Aché people filed a lawsuit charging the Stroessner dictatorship — in power in Paraguay from 1954 to 1989 — with genocide. They lodged the suit in Argentina under the legal principle of “universal jurisdiction” which allows crimes such as genocide and crimes against humanity to be tried and punished in a



separate country when the victims cannot secure justice in their own country.

Ceferino Kreigi, an Aché representative, said: “We’re asking for justice — there was torture, rape, beatings. We can no longer bear the pain we have suffered.”

When they were imprisoned in concentration camps, the Aché people of Paraguay sang “weeping songs” for their land and way of life. One was recorded:

“We, who were once men, never, never will we rove freely between the trees of the forest...”

Our daughters, already beautiful young girls, are now in the houses of the big masters completely tamed from being shouted at so much...

This song is for those who will never again be human...

The Aché, when they were real Aché, shot many animals in the woods...

And now the Aché lie down in ashes, and do not leave their houses anymore, when outside they hear the animals’ cries...

The Aché, oh the Aché are no longer Aché at all...”

Aché woman starving after being forced out of the forest, Paraguay. © Don McCullin/ Survival International

6.3 Ongoing and often absolute

The risk of uncontacted Indigenous populations being wiped out remains a real and immediate danger today. Such genocides were frequent throughout the 20th century and continue in the 21st century. And because uncontacted Indigenous populations are small, the killing of even what may seem like a small number of individuals from an uncontacted Indigenous people is not just a personal tragedy — it can also be the final phase of a genocide, and conclude the total destruction of a people.

Corporate executives are often somewhat dismissive when Survival explains to them that the actions of their company — or of other companies in their supply chain — are likely to lead to mass deaths and are potentially genocidal. They seem to have difficulty in grasping or admitting the immediacy and the true gravity of these situations.

Yet such cases are distressingly common. In Brazil, around three quarters of the Cinta Larga were killed by the effects of contact starting in the 1960s; more than three quarters of the Suruí Paiter were killed in the 1980s following first contact in 1969; and more than two thirds of the Matis were wiped out from the 1980s to the mid-1990s after first contact in 1975 and 1976.¹⁸⁶ The ongoing catastrophic health crisis in the Yanomami territories in Brazil and Venezuela, affecting both contacted and, most likely, uncontacted Yanomami, may already amount to a genocide, and will likely kill entire Yanomami groups if

left unchecked. Current Indian government plans for massive industrial development on Great Nicobar Island represent a “death sentence” for the uncontacted Shompen people whose home it is¹⁸⁷. Mining on the land of the uncontacted Hongana Manyawa risks their annihilation, as does logging in Mashco Piro territory in Peru and cattle ranching in Ayoreo territory in Paraguay.

Genocides do not always involve the total destruction of a people — but for uncontacted peoples, this is a real danger. Uncontacted peoples have small populations, often as a result of previous attacks. The killing of some dozen or even fewer individuals in an uncontacted group can therefore bring both the loss of mothers or fathers, sons, daughters, friends or partners and the total destruction of a people already pushed to the verge of being wiped out.

The uncontacted people in the Kawahiva do Rio Pardo territory — known to outsiders as the Kawahiva — have almost certainly experienced violent attacks in the past. They live in the Brazilian Amazon near the town of Colniza, at one point dubbed “the homicide capital of Brazil”¹⁸⁸. It is not known how many Kawahiva remain alive in their territory, threatened by incursions from illegal loggers and miners. But it is certainly a small enough total that killing even a few people — and especially killing the last remaining hunters or healers — could lead to the final destruction of this entire people. The planned paving of a road just 3km from their territory makes this outcome an even greater risk.

Once the destruction of uncontacted Indigenous peoples are complete, entire peoples are lost and with them their unique languages, ecological knowledge, cultures and cosmology, diminishing the rich diversity of humankind. In 2022, it was discovered that the man known as ‘The Last of His Tribe’, a survivor of brutal attacks that previously killed his entire people

— all his friends and relatives — had died. With the death of this single man, a whole people has been lost — and their stories, their knowledge and way of life are lost with them.

Survival International is working to ensure that none of the 196 uncontacted Indigenous peoples and groups around the world are wiped out by the greed, recklessness and negligence of capitalist society.



Boa Sr, Bo people, Andaman Islands, India

Boa Sr died in 2010 aged around 85, leaving behind no children or siblings. She was the last of her people, the Aka-Bo. She took with her many of the songs and stories that held the secrets of how they understood and connected with the world around them.

When Boa Sr was born in the 1920s, the Great Andamanese people — consisting of 10 distinct tribes, of which Boa Sr's was one — had already been devastated by disease and had their lands stolen from them by British colonizers. Other Great Andamanese tribes, such as the Aka-Kol, had already been wiped out entirely. The Oko-Juwoi and the Aka-Bea were soon to follow.

After independence from the British imperialists, attempts by New Delhi's government to 'save' the remaining Great Andamanese people in 1970 — by relocating the surviving 19 members of the 10 original tribes to their own small island — were also devastating. Robbed of what remained of their



rainforests and their independence, they continued to be ravaged by malnutrition, despondency, depression and alcoholism.

Boa Sr's people believed they were descended from birds. As the sole survivor of her tribe and the only speaker of her language, Boa Sr sought solace by singing to the birds. Professor Anvita Abbi, a linguist working with her to document her language, was able to translate some of these songs; they told of her longing for the life she had lost.

"This place is not good for living". "Let us go to a cleaner place where we can dance and dance."

Of her people, she told Professor Abbi, "All is gone, nothing is left—our jungles, our water, our people, our language. Don't let the language slip away! Keep a hold on it!"

Boa Sr was the last member of the Aka-Bo tribe. © Anvita Abbi/Survival International



PART THREE: Resilience and resistance

“

The way of life that we as Indigenous peoples choose to live is a decision that we ourselves make, and one which the State and society has to respect. National and international laws grant us the right to maintain our cultures and make decisions over our present and future lives. We reject any call or act that seeks to impose a way of life that is rejected by our brothers in isolation and initial contact.”

AIDSEP, FENAMAD and other Peruvian Indigenous organizations, 2015

In the wake of the 2004 tsunami this member of the Sentinelese tribe was photographed firing arrows at a helicopter. © Indian Coastguard/Survival International

7. Laws, policies and standards

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples' rights need to be clearly upheld and enforced through international and national laws, government policies, regulations and action, and also in the policies and practices of companies acting in or sourcing from the countries where uncontacted peoples live.

7.1 International human rights law

“

UN human rights were created to defend those who suffer. So, I would like the UN to do a good job, strongly denouncing what is happening to us, so that the authorities of Brazil respect the Yanomami, the uncontacted peoples and all the peoples still not recognized.”

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, statement to the UN Human Rights Council, 2020

International human rights law recognizes and safeguards the rights of Indigenous peoples through a number of legal protections, and much of it is relatively recent — even more so for the rights of uncontacted peoples specifically. The principles of international law are nonetheless clear: uncontacted peoples have the absolute right to be uncontacted (the “no-contact principle”); they have ownership rights over all the territories they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used; and no activity or development is allowed on their lands. Practice, of course, falls short of the standards of international law.

As international human rights law emerged after World War II and during the wave of decolonization that followed, Indigenous and tribal people were at first excluded from and largely ignored by the process. The words ‘Indigenous’, ‘tribe’ or ‘tribal’ do not appear anywhere in the original text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD, 1965), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966), or the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, 1966).

There was, however, some early — and extremely important — law on Indigenous rights. The first was the International Labor Organization (ILO)’s Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention (no. 107), adopted in 1957. Assimilationist in approach, it was later replaced by ILO 169, adopted in 1989. Both enshrined Indigenous and tribal peoples’ collective ownership of their land¹⁸⁹, among other crucial rights.

Outside these important conventions, most of the international framework codifying uncontacted Indigenous rights has emerged during the 21st century, building on decades of work by Indigenous people and organizations, and their allies.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), passed by the UN General Assembly in 2007, is a landmark instrument, not least because Indigenous people had a major role in drafting it. While not directly legally binding, it reflects international consensus and provides a framework for the interpretation of binding international UN human rights conventions, such as the ICCPR and ICESCR. The Organization of American States' American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted in 2016 after 30 years of negotiation, goes even further in including an article explicitly on the rights of uncontacted peoples as part of its core text¹⁹⁰. The Guidelines for the Protection of Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and Initial Contact in the Amazon Region, the Grand Chaco and Eastern Paraguay¹⁹¹, finalized in 2012, are focused entirely on the rights of uncontacted and recently contacted peoples. While written about peoples in South America, the same legal principles should apply in Asia and the Pacific.

The application of core human rights treaties such as ICESCR and ICERD to Indigenous peoples — and even more specifically to uncontacted peoples — has also, over time, been explicitly and officially recognized by the UN Human Rights Council¹⁹², the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights¹⁹³, the treaty bodies that oversee implementation of these conventions¹⁹⁴, and the UN General Assembly¹⁹⁵.

This recognition, alongside the UNDRIP and the American Declaration, has codified crucial rights for uncontacted Indigenous peoples which rest on the universal rights to life and health, to freedom from violence and discrimination and,

crucially, to self-determination. These universal rights form the basis of uncontacted peoples' right not to be contacted, and further entrench Indigenous peoples' rights to their land.

Under international human rights law, Indigenous peoples who live without contact with outsiders have the right to be uncontacted. Firstly, the rights to life and health — and the state obligation to uphold these rights — include protecting uncontacted peoples from the fatal effects of forced contact. Crucially, the right to self-determination also necessarily includes the right to be uncontacted. Self-determination is central to both the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the right to it is set out in Article 1.1 of both treaties. Numerous UN human rights bodies and representatives have stated that respect for the self-determination of uncontacted peoples requires complete respect for what they have termed “the principle of no-contact”, and that this right not to have contact or be contacted is absolutely fundamental.¹⁹⁶

“

For indigenous peoples in isolation, the guarantee of the right to self-determination means respect for their decision to remain in isolation.”

UN Human Rights Council Guidelines for the Protection of Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and Initial Contact in the Amazon Region, the Grand Chaco and Eastern Paraguay, 2012

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples have **ownership rights over their territories**. The right of uncontacted peoples — indeed, of all Indigenous peoples — to their lands and resources has been established in international human rights law since 1957 and is stated clearly in Article 14 of ILO 169: “The rights of ownership and possession of the peoples concerned over the lands which they traditionally occupy shall be recognized.” Many uncontacted peoples are nomadic hunter gatherers, and, as for all Indigenous peoples, these rights encompass the whole of the territories that they use. With land being central to uncontacted peoples’ survival and to their identity, land rights are reinforced by their right to practice their culture, as set out in ILO 169 and the ICESCR. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights stated in 2009: “the strong communal dimension of indigenous peoples’ cultural life is indispensable to their existence, well-being and full development, and includes the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired.”¹⁹⁷

State obligations go beyond recognizing land ownership rights, to include actively **protecting the land of uncontacted Indigenous peoples**. This is elaborated in UNDRIP, which unpacks land ownership rights of all Indigenous peoples and sets out a state obligation to give “protection to these lands, territories and resources”.¹⁹⁸ The provisions of both the ICCPR and ICESCR that “In no case, may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence”¹⁹⁹ require, for uncontacted peoples, both recognizing their land rights and ensuring the protection of that land.²⁰⁰ The guidelines on uncontacted and recently contacted Indigenous peoples issued by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights make explicit that uncontacted peoples’ rights to life, health, self-determination and land require recognizing land rights, forbidding outsiders access to these territories, prohibiting “any type of economic or

other activity in such lands, with special emphasis on extractive and missionary activities”, and restricting access to surrounding “buffer zones”.²⁰¹

The requirement for **Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)**²⁰² has further emerged as a crucial principle of international law for all Indigenous peoples, rooted in rights to self-determination, to land, and to freedom from discrimination.²⁰³ Proper enforcement of requirements for FPIC are a crucial means to ensure that these rights are actually upheld in reality, and it has specific relevance for uncontacted peoples. According to the FPIC principle, nothing can be done on or to Indigenous peoples’ land without Free, Prior and Informed Consent — and this cannot, by definition, be obtained from uncontacted peoples. The impossibility of obtaining consent that is ‘free’, ‘prior’ or ‘informed’ from people who reject contact means that any action taken by outsiders on the land of uncontacted Indigenous people violates international law.²⁰⁴

International human rights law — while piecemeal — is nonetheless clear. Uncontacted peoples have ownership rights over their land, have the absolute right to be uncontacted, and — given the impossibility of obtaining FPIC — no activity is to be allowed on their lands.

Practice, however, falls far short of the standards of international law. There is always some gap — and in many cases, a vast gulf — between these standards and what actually happens to uncontacted Indigenous peoples. International law is given further enforceability by being written into national laws and policies, industry guidelines and corporate commitments, as explored in the following chapters.

Applying international human rights law for uncontacted peoples in South America

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights are increasingly taking steps to enforce international law to protect the rights of uncontacted peoples in South America. Some examples are:

- **2006** — the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) demanded that Ecuador protect the uncontacted Tagaeri and Taromenane peoples.
- **2007** — the IACHR demanded that Peru protect the land of uncontacted Mashco Piro, Yora and Amahuaca peoples.
- **2016** — the IACHR demanded that the Paraguayan government take measures to protect the Ayoreo Totobiegosode, including uncontacted groups, and their land.
- **2022** — the Inter-American Court of Human Rights took on a ground-breaking case on the situation of the Tagaeri and Taromenane peoples in Ecuador — the first time in the Court’s history that a state has been tried for a failure of its duty to protect uncontacted peoples.

- **2024** — the Inter-American Court issued its judgment in the Tagaeri and Taromenane case, finding that the State had failed to protect the territory of the uncontacted peoples by allowing oil extraction and illegal logging on their land and that it had “violated the right to collective property and the right to self-determination in relation to the safeguarding of the principle of no-contact and protection of the Tagaeri and Taromenane Peoples...”
- **2024** — the IACHR filed a case with the Inter-American Court about the violations of the rights of the uncontacted Mashco Piro, Yora and Amahuaca peoples, and the failure of Peru to protect them from logging, oil and gas exploration, and mining.



CASE STUDY

The Kawahiva people of Rio Pardo, Brazil

The uncontacted Kawahiva of Rio Pardo are on the frontline of the destruction and violent colonization of the Brazilian Amazon. Their territory, in Mato Grosso state, sits right in the area where colonizers including loggers, cattle ranchers and soybean growers are rapidly pushing up from the south, bringing deforestation and devastation to the Amazon as they seize ever more land. The ruthless violence of these colonizers has made the nearby town of Colniza one of the most violent places in Brazil. Yet in the midst of these threats, the Brazilian authorities have spent decades dragging their feet over recognizing and protecting the Kawahiva's land, as is required by both international and Brazilian law.

Very little is known about this group of uncontacted Indigenous people. They are thought to speak Kawahiva, as that is a common language among Indigenous peoples in that part of the Amazon. As hunter gatherers, they rely totally on the forest and rivers for their livelihood and well-being. Likely part of a larger group which split up over the years in order to avoid

colonizers, they may number just several dozen people. It is likely that many were murdered in the past by landgrabbers, or died from diseases brought in by colonizers, to which they have no immunity. They have always rejected contact, becoming more nomadic to avoid those invading their land, and on a rare occasion when they came near a logging camp, throwing branches and nutshells.

Their presence was repeatedly reported to the authorities from at least the 1980s, and was officially confirmed by FUNAI, the Brazilian Indigenous Affairs Agency, in 1999. Since 2001, there has been some protection for their land — but it has been precarious. A time-limited land protection order was overturned in 2005 by a judge lobbied by loggers and local politicians, but then reinstated after Survival's campaigning. The next step should have been full recognition — 'demarcation' — of their territory, bringing further protection. But this has still not happened. In 2016, the Ministry of Justice published a decree setting out the borders of the territory — yet the process towards full recognition of their land rights has dragged on, mired in bureaucracy and legal challenges.

Throughout these decades of delay, land grabbers and loggers have continued to invade the territory, posing huge threats to the tribe.

They are threatened by violence. In 2005, a public prosecutor detained 29 people for suspected involvement in the killing of Kawahiva people — including a former governor and a senior policeman. This was Brazil's first-ever investigation into the genocide of an uncontacted Indigenous people; but the case stalled due to a lack of evidence.

They are also threatened by land grabbing. Countless environmental crimes — including illegal logging and land grabbing — have been reported in the areas surrounding the



Kawahiva Indigenous Territory. In one area supposedly reserved for “sustainable” activities, almost 10,000 hectares of forest has been destroyed in just five years. Cattle ranching, the next stage after deforestation, is already starting in some areas. State government plans to pave a road which passes just 3km from the Kawahiva territory will directly open their territory to illegal exploitation.

Rare footage of them, recorded in 2011, showed a community in good health. Despite this, the threats pushing on them from the outside risk killing them all. Jair Candor, the renowned FUNAI official in charge of protecting the territory from invasions, has said, “The only way to ensure their survival is to map out the land and have in place a permanent land protection team. Otherwise, the Kawahiva will be relegated to the history books, like so many other Indigenous peoples of this region.”

But there is at last some sign that greater protection is coming. In early 2025, after lobbying and a Supreme Court order to produce a timetable, FUNAI publicly confirmed that they will demarcate the Kawahiva territory by the end of 2025. Survival and allies are campaigning for FUNAI to demarcate the Rio Pardo territory urgently, as this is the only way to guarantee the Kawahiva’s survival.

The last of the Kawahiva are forced to live on the run from armed loggers and powerful ranchers. Image taken from rare footage from a chance encounter with government agents.
© FUNAI

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It is the duty of the state, and of all states, not only here in Brazil but also in other countries that still have Indigenous and uncontacted peoples, to protect them, demarcate their lands and allow them to live according to their traditions. ... Uncontacted Indigenous people can still leave and make contact with us. Nobody is saying that they can't take the initiative if they see fit. However, “white people” should not do so by any means — they have to respect their space.”

Sydney Possuelo, first Director of the uncontacted peoples unit in FUNAI (Brazil's Indigenous Affairs Agency), in an interview with Survival, 2019

“

Forced or unwanted contacts should be prosecuted under the criminal laws of each State as a way of guaranteeing the rights of Indigenous peoples in isolation.”

UN Human Rights Council Guidelines for the Protection of Indigenous Peoples in Voluntary Isolation and Initial Contact in the Amazon Region, the Grand Chaco and Eastern Paraguay, 2012

On the whole, South American governments, legislatures and regional bodies have taken stronger positions on the rights of uncontacted peoples — in national law and policy and in regional declarations — than those in Asia and the Pacific. However, even within South America, there is some considerable variation, with much stronger policy and practice in Brazil — home to the largest number of uncontacted groups — than, say, Colombia — home to the third largest number. All countries need to strengthen the national legislation and its implementation, in line with the requirements of international human rights law.

All the countries in South America where we are confident uncontacted Indigenous peoples are living have ratified ILO Convention 169.²⁰⁵ None of those in Asia and the Pacific have done so²⁰⁶; although India has ratified the earlier ILO 107, which includes Indigenous land ownership rights. Every country where uncontacted peoples live has ratified ICESCR, ICCPR and ICERD.

The significant difference in the way governments in Asia and South America approach the rights of uncontacted peoples is clearly discernible in their regional and national laws. The OAS American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2016) includes provisions explicitly about the rights of uncontacted peoples, notably Article 26: “1. Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation or initial contact have the right to remain in that condition and to live freely and in accordance with their cultures. 2. States shall, with the knowledge and participation of indigenous peoples and organizations, adopt appropriate policies and measures to recognize, respect, and protect the lands, territories, environment, and cultures of these peoples as well as their life, and individual and collective integrity.”²⁰⁷

This groundbreaking declaration informed the March 2025 judgment on Ecuador’s failure to uphold the rights of the uncontacted Tagaeri and Taromenane by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and it will go on to inform other relevant judgments in the Americas and beyond.

Article 26 reflects the important evolution of understanding of the rights of uncontacted Indigenous peoples in South American countries. Until the mid-1980s most governments viewed contact, despite the death it brought, as a positive step, and it had been actively pursued by Brazil for decades. The catastrophic lessons from this approach (see chapter 2) led Brazil in 1987 to become the first country to adopt a specific policy of no-contact, in recognition of the deadly effects of

even well-intentioned and well-prepared contact. Since then, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia and Ecuador have adopted similar policies. Venezuela and Paraguay have no specific policy on contact, although both supported adoption of the American Declaration²⁰⁸.

In **Brazil**, uncontacted tribes, like all Indigenous peoples, have “original” rights to their lands. When the government Indigenous Affairs agency (FUNAI) gathers evidence of the possible presence of uncontacted groups, it can immediately grant their territory a Land Protection Order (LPO), (“restrição de uso”), which gives some protection until the land can be fully recognized; although it is a far more fragile protection than full recognition — demarcation and registration — of the territory. For the last few years, Survival has worked with ally organizations in Brazil to campaign for creation, and renewal of much-needed Land Protection Orders; new LPOs issued since then have lasted until the territories are fully recognized. Some organizations in Brazil are campaigning for a more robust instrument for temporary land protection, fully backed by legislation. There are several territories occupied exclusively by uncontacted people that have been legally demarcated and ratified, such as the Hi-Merimã territory, while others, such as Mamoriá Grande, have been granted Land Protection Orders. No outsiders are allowed to enter or carry out any activity on land that has been demarcated or given a Land Protection Order recognizing it as uncontacted people’s land, unless it is related to official land protection and monitoring work.

Not all national laws pertaining to land rights are equally strong. In **Peru**, lands recognized as territories of uncontacted Indigenous peoples can still be opened up to activities such as oil and gas drilling, logging or mining if that is judged to be “in the national interest”²⁰⁹.

Brazil and **Peru** have specific government units dedicated to uncontacted Indigenous peoples. **Bolivian** law created a government unit responsible for the most vulnerable Indigenous peoples; but is not solely dedicated to the protection of uncontacted peoples, and its impact and effectiveness has been almost non-existent. Bolivia is, so far, the only country to have adopted UNDRIP into domestic law, on paper at least. While the declaration is not specific about uncontacted peoples, its provisions for Indigenous territories and FPIC give strong protections to uncontacted Indigenous peoples' land rights. Enforcement, however, is not matching up to the promise of the legislation.

Colombia — the country with the world's third highest number of uncontacted Indigenous peoples and groups — does not have a functioning governmental unit to monitor and protect isolated Indigenous peoples, and is far behind in its recognition and territorial protection of these peoples. The state legally recognizes the no-contact principle and right to remain uncontacted²¹⁰, and in 2018 finally established “special measures” for uncontacted peoples²¹¹. But implementation has been minimal. Sixteen of 18 uncontacted Indigenous groups in Colombia have no official recognition or land protection whatsoever.

Ecuador's 2008 constitution, in article 57, recognizes the territorial rights and the no-contact right of uncontacted peoples and those in initial contact, and sets out the State's obligation to protect these rights. A public policy implementing these principles has not, however, been finalized. There is a recognized territory for the three recognized uncontacted peoples in Ecuador, the Tagaeri and Taromenane No-Go Zone ('Zona Intangible Tagaeri Taromenane', ZITT), but it is insufficient, and does not cover the full area that is home to the uncontacted peoples.

There are uncontacted groups who are part of four peoples in **Venezuela**: the Jodi, Eñepa, Uwotujja and Yanomami. Venezuela does not formally recognize uncontacted peoples and there is no specific legislation in Venezuela regarding their rights. Nevertheless, the Public Ombudsman and the Ministry of Health have recognized them and taken specific actions to guarantee their protection and health.²¹²

Although two uncontacted peoples and one with very limited contact live in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in **India**, it has no national policy on uncontacted peoples specifically. But India's Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA) recognizes the rights of all forest-dwelling tribal peoples to live in and from their forests and to protect and manage their lands. In addition, for Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, which include the uncontacted Sentinelese and Shompen, it recognizes their rights to community tenure and wider habitation rights. Despite attempts by the current Indian government to weaken it, the Forest Rights Act is an important law to safeguard the rights of Indigenous peoples in India, including the Shompen and the Sentinelese.

There are some local protections in India which appear strong on paper, and yet historically, these have been applied patchily. Both the Sentinelese and the Shompen, and the recently contacted Ang, are protected under the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation, 1956. This includes some limited recognition of land rights, and bans entry into their territories and exploitation of their resources by outsiders, unless granted permission by the authorities. But some of the greatest threats have come from the assimilationist policies of these same authorities.

The Indian authorities' 1991–2021 Master Plan to settle the Ang (then known as the Jarawa) in villages was stopped only after a huge campaign by Survival and local organizations. It was also only after many rejected attempts to contact the Sentinelese, and a campaign protesting these attempts, (again supported by Survival) that the Indian government abandoned its forced contact campaign. Since then, the Indian authorities have instituted an “eyes on, hands off” policy of monitoring Sentinelese territory without contact. Yet on Great Nicobar Island, the Indian government persists with plans for a huge industrial port, a city, a military base and other huge developments on the Shompen's land. The project flagrantly disregards both the Forest Rights Act, and the 2015 Shompen Policy which specifically warns against any major port project.²¹³

Indonesia has no specific policy on the rights of uncontacted tribes, nor any program to protect them and their territories. On the contrary, some Indonesian officials explicitly endorse contact, and it wasn't until 2024 that any high-ranking official drew attention to the situation of uncontacted peoples when speaking out against mining on their land.²¹⁴

Unlike all the countries discussed above, Indonesia has not ratified the Genocide Convention, and its violent occupation of West Papua makes it the government most likely to inflict state-sponsored violence on uncontacted peoples. Its ongoing genocide²¹⁵ against Indigenous West Papuans threatens the whole population, including uncontacted peoples. While the Indonesian government has provisions which recognize Indigenous communities²¹⁶, recognition involves a long self-registration and state process, which makes it much less accessible and means that uncontacted peoples' registration depends on contacted relatives managing this bureaucracy. An Indigenous peoples' law has been drafted, but has been

stalled for years. That means there is no law covering the Indigenous rights of an estimated 50–70 million Indigenous people in the country — let alone the uncontacted peoples such as the Hongana Manyawa in Halmahera, who currently face existential threats.

	Claim initiated	Land fully recognized	Time taken
Uneiuxi Indigenous Territory, Brazil	1982	2023	41 years
Trombetas / Mapuera Indigenous Territory, Brazil	1987	2020	33 years
Riozinho do Alto Envira Indigenous Territory, Brazil	1987	2012	25 years
Kakataibo Indigenous Reserve, Peru	1993	2021	28 years
Yavari Tapiche Indigenous Reserve, Peru	2003	2021	18 years
Sierra del Divisor Occidental Indigenous Reserve, Peru	2005	2024	19 years

This figure shows the slow pace for recognition of various uncontacted Indigenous territories in Brazil and Peru. In some countries, notably in Asia and the Pacific, even these slow processes are generally lacking. At least 83 uncontacted peoples worldwide do not have recognition or official protection of their territories.



Yuri & Passé peoples, Colombia

Colombia is home to the third-highest number of uncontacted Indigenous peoples on the planet — surpassed only by Brazil and Peru. Yet while Brazil has been recognizing Indigenous territories for uncontacted peoples since the 1960s, and Peru since the 1990s, Colombia only did so for the first time in late 2024, with the creation of an official Indigenous territory on the land of the Yuri and Passé. This is a huge step forward, and a tribute to the hard work of Indigenous and allied activists. But the timing shows how very far Colombia lags behind some of its neighbors in upholding uncontacted peoples' rights.

The Yuri and the Passé live between the Caquetá and Putumayo Rivers in the Colombian Amazon. Colonial invasion of their territory by rubber tappers, traffickers and missionaries in the 19th century brought widespread violence and death. The surviving Yuri and Passé sought refuge deep in the rainforest. Today, they still exercise their right to remain isolated, refusing any contact with outsiders.

But illegal mining is advancing into their territory at a furious pace. In 2023, satellite images taken along the Puré River,

which runs through their territory, showed ‘floating villages’ of illegal miners, and heavy machinery such as dredgers and tugboats. Almost 300 mining dredges were recorded on the river in 2022, and studies report that it has grown since. The risks to the Yuri and Passé are immense and deadly: mining contaminates their water with mercury and destroys their forest, while the colonizers stripping their land often carry infectious diseases to which the uncontacted people have no immunity.



*Communal house in the area known to be inhabited by Yuri and Passé people.
© Cristóbal Von Rothkirch*

Indigenous neighbors and allies have been working hard to secure protection of their territory. In 2018, Colombia finally passed a law (Decree 1232) requiring the state to protect the lives — and thus the territories — of Indigenous peoples in isolation. In late 2023, a Colombian court issued an order that the government take action to protect the territory of the Yuri and Passé, the first ever such court order in Colombia for uncontacted Indigenous peoples. Then in late 2024, the government officially recognized Yuri and Passé land as an Indigenous territory — again, the first recognition of uncontacted peoples’ land in Colombia. But real change is still to come. Neighboring Indigenous communities say that illegal mining is still a threat: the territory must be protected on the ground, and not just in law.

For the other uncontacted peoples in Colombia, even this protection is very far off. The Yuri and Passé’s existence was only officially acknowledged by the government in 2018 — at least a decade after strong evidence of their presence emerged. Another 16 uncontacted peoples whose presence in the Colombian Amazon is also clearly evidenced have yet to be recognized. There have not even yet been formal government studies of their presence. Without these studies there can be no official recognition, without recognition there will be no protection of their territory — and without their territory, there is no survival.

7.3 Industry standards

“

The place where the uncontacted Indigenous people live, fish, hunt and plant must be protected. The whole world must know that they are there in their forest and that the authorities must respect their right to live there.”

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, Brazil, 2010

Industry standards and certification schemes, while far from perfect, can promote accountability and set expectations for buyers or investors. Weak guidelines or those that are poorly enforced can allow abuses to flourish — as with Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified logging on Mashco Piro land in Peru. But strong standards — like those of the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance (IRMA) — can help steer companies and industries away from violations of uncontacted peoples’ rights. There is increasing recognition of uncontacted Indigenous peoples’ rights in some industries. All industries must implement strong standards prohibiting activity on or sourcing from uncontacted peoples’ territories.

In the absence of strong national laws, and given the challenges of enforcing international law, the standards to which companies and industries hold themselves are particularly important. Industry standards have no force in law, and many companies may ignore them. But they can still be a means for buyers, investors or customers to understand whether companies comply with core international human rights law or other human rights or environmental standards, and to hold them to account when they do not. As such, they can act as useful leverage on private companies that attempt to present themselves as responsible or ‘sustainable’ businesses.

Perhaps surprisingly, the push for sustainability is driving expansion in some of the industries that most endanger uncontacted Indigenous peoples. Mining is expected to boom in coming decades, as manufacturers and mining companies insist on the necessity of ‘critical minerals’ for a transition to renewable energy.²¹⁷²¹⁸ The increasing demand for wood as a ‘green’ building material drives the market for forestry and logging products.²¹⁹ Meanwhile, cattle ranching remains the biggest driver of Amazonian deforestation²²⁰. These multiple onslaughts on uncontacted peoples’ territories and resources make it hugely important to have industry standards and certification schemes that rule out sourcing products from uncontacted peoples’ territories or from companies operating in those territories.

Industry codes must be updated to ensure robust provisions for uncontacted Indigenous peoples’ rights. These can include individual companies’ standards and commitments, independent guidelines, or industry certification or auditing schemes, with rigorous verification so companies meet a set of standards created by a certifying body.

Certification schemes are far from infallible in preventing or even drawing attention to abuses, and are often poorly implemented. The FSC has guidelines on Indigenous peoples and FPIC (though not currently about uncontacted peoples²²¹), but still certified a logging company operating on the territory of uncontacted Mashco Piro people in Peru as “sustainable”. The FSC argued at first that since the company had a valid logging permit, its activities must be acceptable. Pressure on the FSC from Peruvian Indigenous organizations FENAMAD and AIDESEP, along with Survival, led them to suspend the certification, raising the possibility that certification will be fully revoked in light of the violations of the Mashco Piro’s rights.

There has been progress in the last few years, with some companies and industry bodies beginning to recognize uncontacted people’s rights, following — with some delay — the developments in international human rights law. The strongest standards so far come from the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance (IRMA), which includes extensive recognition of uncontacted people’s rights.²²² Survival is already seeing the impact of these standards in discussions with electric vehicle manufacturers about their supply chain and sourcing decisions.

“

Recent moves by major companies like Tesla to consider no-go mining zones in these regions do signal a shift in thinking. It also reflects growing consumer and investor demands for secure, responsible, and ethically sourced materials across the supply chain whilst underlining the risks of failing to protect and respect the rights of these vulnerable Indigenous communities.”

Danielle Martin, the director of social performance at the International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM), writing in Mongabay²²³

Widespread, clear and well-monitored commitments to ensure that nothing in a supply chain comes from companies operating on uncontacted peoples’ land would be a powerful tool to protect uncontacted peoples’ rights, and would provide clear guidance for investors and buyers.

TESTIMONY

Rita Piripkura, Brazil

Rita Piripkura's people's land is deep in the Amazon rainforest. When she was born, probably in the 1970s, all of her tribe was uncontacted. They fished, hunted, collected fruit and honey, and slept in temporary shelters made from palm leaves. The name 'Piripkura' ('butterfly people') was given to them by a neighboring tribe to describe how they move through the forest; it is one Rita herself now often uses.

The Piripkura territory, in the Colniza district of the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso, has long been invaded, by rubber tappers and then loggers, and the forest is being aggressively cut down. In interviews with Survival in 2017 and 2021, Rita described how her people went on the run from loggers invading their territory, and how many of her family were then murdered by loggers in a massacre in the early 1980s.

"This is Piripkura land. This is my land. My mother and I lived here, on this land. Me, my sister, my father, my mother, my brother.



Rita Piripkura, the only contacted member of the Piripkura people. Her brother and nephew, Baita and Tamandua, still live in the forest. © Sarah Shenker/Survival International

"The loggers arrived and cut down the forest here. My grandmother told me: 'The white men are cutting down the trees!' They cut down lots of trees, and we stopped hunting over there.

"[One day] white men arrived at dawn and killed everyone. [They killed] nine people. 'Let's go,' my family said. 'They've killed people. Let's go to the other side [of the river].'

"My family used a jatobá tree to make a canoe. It was the early hours of the morning. It was very dark. There were lots of mosquitos, it was very windy, the river was big."

In the midst of these invasions and massacres, Rita came into contact with non-Indigenous people, and was trapped into forced labor. Eventually she met and married a man from the Karipuna tribe. She says that when she left the forest, she still had about 15 uncontacted relatives in the forest. Now only her brother and nephew, Baita and Tamandua, are known to be there, remaining in intermittent contact. It's not known whether there are more uncontacted Piripkura.

“Now, my brother [Baita] is [deep in the forest] and Tamandua, my nephew. There are two of them there, I saw one of their shelters. I'm worried that [the loggers] might kill them.”

The Brazilian government only began officially protecting this territory in 2008, with a series of Land Protection Orders (LPO) — temporary decrees that block outsiders from the territory, but fall short of full recognition as an “Indigenous territory”. Despite the order, cattle ranching and deforestation continue. The Piripkura territory must be fully recognized and protected.

“There are lots of land grabbers around. They could kill both my brother and my nephew. If they kill them, there won't be anyone left.”

8. Resilience

“

Life before contact was incredible.”

Salomon Dunu, Matsés, Peru, to Survival in 2012

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples' right to remain uncontacted is not just an important human rights principle — it is also demonstrably important for their wellbeing. Available evidence indicates that uncontacted peoples are far healthier and live longer than those forced into contact. Their extensive botanical expertise and ecological knowledge make them expert stewards of their environments. If their rights are respected and their lands unmolested, they can live healthily and happily in their forests.

Uncontacted peoples' absolute right to choose whether, how and when to be in contact with others is a well-established human rights principle.²²⁴ Decades of experience and numerous testimonies from recently contacted people also make clear that this right is integral to their wellbeing. The occasional argument that the survival of uncontacted peoples is “not viable in the long term”²²⁵, reflected in popular depictions of Indigenous

peoples as “doomed” or “vanishing”²²⁶, is very much a discredited view.

There is no need to romanticize uncontacted people’s lives, or to deny that they experience challenges and hardships, to recognize that their way of life is viable and valuable. When peoples and their land are already under pressure, when many have already been killed, it can be harder to maintain communities, livelihoods and ways of life. But the alternatives are far worse. This chapter explores the evidence on uncontacted Indigenous people’s health, wellbeing, resilience, expertise and ways of life, that points to them not just surviving but thriving as long as their rights are not violated and their lands are not invaded or destroyed.



The Pintupi Nine, Australia

In October 1984, a headline in Australia’s Melbourne Herald screamed “We find the lost tribe”. The Indigenous people to whom the headline referred, the so-called ‘Pintupi Nine’, were not “lost”. They were living on their land — but without contact with others.

A few weeks earlier, two of the Pintupi Nine, Warlimpirrnga and Piyirti, brothers in their 20s, had been out hunting. Surrounded by spiky spinifex grasses jutting out of the hard, red earth of their land on the edge of Western Australia’s Gibson Desert, the brothers speared a kangaroo. As they moved in to take their kill, they noticed something unusual: “We could smell the feces of other humans in the air,” Warlimpirrnga later recounted, “And we saw smoke in the distance.”

They walked a couple of kilometers and saw two men camping.

“We moved closer and stood on a rock and could see people camping down below ... I ran towards where they were standing. Then I snuck over closer. I coughed. The people heard me. It looked like they were scared. They became frantic, running back and forth,” Warlimpirrnga said later. “I wanted

to spear them... I said, 'My grandfather died here. This is my country.'"

Despite appearing scared, one of the strangers filled a billycan with water and offered it to Warlimpirnga.

"When he did, we thought, 'we won't spear him,'" said Warlimpirnga.

The campers, a man called Pinta Pinta and his son, were also Pintupi. They were part of a different group of formerly nomadic Pintupi people that had recently moved back to the desert, reclaiming their land after a disastrous government resettlement program decades earlier. In the 1950s, when the British military were testing missiles in the western desert, the Australian government contacted and forcibly moved the Pintupi people. They resettled most hundreds of miles to the east, along with other Indigenous people evicted from their land. Pushed off their lands into these resettlement areas, many Indigenous people soon died from disease, trauma and alcohol.

In the 1980s, refusing to give up on their homeland, Pinta Pinta and other Pintupi people moved back to their desert.

Warlimpirnga and Piyirti were part of an extended family group that had avoided this disaster. They stayed living as nomadic hunter gatherers in the vast desert, part of the outback that has been home to Indigenous peoples for some 50,000 years. Their group remained out of contact until the day Warlimpirnga and Piyirti headed towards the smoke of a distant fire.

After making contact, most of their group of nine Pintupi people chose to join Pinta Pinta's community; some have since become well-known artists. The community continued to fight for the return of their traditional land, and in 2001 a territory of 43,000 sq km was recognized as belonging to them.²²⁷

8.1 Healthy and thriving communities

“

Before we knew the whites [non-Indigenous people], life was better. There was more hunting and it was nearer. Then the loggers and FUNAI entered and there was little hunting. Before contact there were no health problems — now we have flu and malaria. People died of flu after contact.”

Piaka Uru Eu Wau Wau, Brazil, to Survival, 1992

Available evidence and expert opinion point to uncontacted people's health generally being very good, as long their rights are respected. Their environments and ways of life are well suited to both physical health and happiness. Observations and testimonies of recently contacted people reveal communities that are healthy and thriving when not under attack.

500

Plant species used in their daily lives by the Yanomami in Brazil and Venezuela, of whom there are up to 13 uncontacted groups

54

Unique vertebrate species found only Great Nicobar island in the Indian Ocean, in the forest that is home to and cared for by the Shompen people

1.6m hectares

Approx. area of rainforest stewarded by six uncontacted Indigenous peoples in Asia

72

Most common age of death for modern hunter gatherer peoples, on average

70

Illegal roads in Arariboia Territory, Brazil, home to uncontacted Awá, shut down by Indigenous Guajajara Guardians

119

Members of the Indigenous UNIVAJA Surveillance Team, monitoring and protecting land in the Javari Valley

5

Surveillance posts run by local Indigenous organization FENAMAD to protect the territory of uncontacted peoples in the Madre do Dios rainforest, Peru

1987

Year of introduction of Brazil's no-contact policy, under pressure from government staff working with Indigenous peoples

Sources: William Milliken, Bruce Albert & Gale Goodwin Gomez; UNESCO; Survival calculations; Dr Michael Gurven & Dr Hillard Kaplan; Guajajara Guardians; UNIVAJA; FENAMAD; FUNAI

The deadly impact of infectious diseases on recently contacted tribes contrasts strikingly with the state of uncontacted peoples' health when they are not under attack, which medical experts describe as "extremely good"²²⁸. This should not be surprising, given how uncontacted people fare on so many of the established determinants of health, which include: safe water and clean air, control over your work, social support networks and family, culture and traditions, having sufficient healthy food, having an active childhood, physical exercise, and not being poorer than others in your society²²⁹ — all typical features of uncontacted people's lives.

“

We lead a peaceful existence in the forest and we're happy. We have everything we need here. The trees bear a lot of fruit and the flowers are magnificent.”

Recently contacted Ang person, India, 2014

Uncontacted peoples live in forests, in natural environments that — unless they have come under attack — are without pollution. Living directly from their immediate surroundings, which are typically rich in biodiversity, uncontacted Indigenous people also have some of the world's healthiest diets, eating fish, meat, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds that they grow, hunt, fish or gather, with nothing machine-processed. The uncontacted T'simane in Bolivia have contacted relatives, who also live a largely hunter gatherer way of life; a recent study found that they have “the lowest reported levels of coronary artery disease of any population recorded to date”.²³⁰ The finding is attributed

variously to their diet and their active and healthy way of life, as well as, possibly, genetics.

While uncontacted tribes' populations are relatively small — more so if they have been under attack — they have intricate rules to avoid intrafamilial relations and marriages within isolated Indigenous populations.²³¹ Recently contacted people have explained these as including requirements that marriages only happen between, rather than within, specific bands and family groups.

Their wellbeing is not just physical — many of the same factors that support physical health also help ensure happiness. Researchers have established that the predominant drivers of happiness are “mental, emotional, and physical well-being, a purposeful holistic work-life balance, nurturing social relationships, caring for self and others, and being in harmony with one's culture, traditions, community, religion, and environment.”²³²



The seas and forest of the Ang's territory provide everything they need to survive and thrive — if their lands are properly protected. © Salomé/Survival International

What we know about uncontacted people's lives offers evidence of all these factors. When their lands are not invaded, uncontacted Indigenous people have considerable control over their lives and how they spend their time. While the divide between work and leisure time is perhaps less starkly defined than in societies based on formal employment, uncontacted Indigenous peoples — like other hunter gatherer peoples — have active lives with considerable time to relax with friends and family. So much so that hunter gatherers were famously dubbed the “original affluent society”²³³ by anthropologists who noted that some need to work only three to five hours a day to provide for themselves.²³⁴

“

The Jarawa [Ang] of the Andaman Islands enjoy a time of opulence. Their forests give them more than they need.”

Professor Anvita Abbi, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India, 2004

As with other hunter gatherers, many uncontacted Indigenous peoples' societies are highly egalitarian, without social hierarchies or formal leadership. Among the Ang, who are recently contacted and still live in relative isolation, the sharing of food is incredibly important, and when someone returns from a successful hunt, meat is divided among households. Sharing cements their social relations and helps to keep the community together. Collective distribution prevents hoarding and waste, helps ensure community survival, strengthens social cohesion, and prevents conflict.

“

Here everything is beautiful and peaceful. We like sharing everything, we are all together and we only hunt what we need.”

Recently contacted Ang person, India, 2014

Available evidence from uncontacted peoples left to live in peace indicates thriving communities. The iconic aerial photos and film taken in 2008 and 2010 of the uncontacted group known as the people of the Alto Humaitá, living on the Peru/Brazil border, captured the imagination of the world. Surrounding their malocas (communal houses) were well-cultivated gardens, filled with manioc, papaya and banana — evidence of longer-term habitation without disturbance. Their baskets were filled with food, they wore an array of adornments, and some wore a bright red dye from the seeds of the annatto tree. All observations of the Sentinelese on North Sentinel Island show them looking strong and healthy, with many children and pregnant women — in stark contrast to their contacted neighbors the Great Andamanese, who were killed by waves of disease after contact, their population eventually plummeting by 99 percent.

Many thousands of people around the world remember life without contact with outside societies. In more than 50 years of work with Indigenous peoples, formerly uncontacted people have, again and again, told *Survival* of their positive memories of life without contact — and of their determination to prevent contact damaging more people’s lives.

“

The Mashco Piro are tall and strong. They are fast too. They are very intelligent. Sometimes they ask a lot of questions but they don’t answer ours. We don’t compete for resources, they are hunters, we are fishermen. Sometimes they have come for our manioc and bananas. But that’s all they want. It must be because it is scarce in their territory.”

Enriquez Añez, a Yine Indigenous man living near the Mashco Piro, Peru, to Survival, 2024



Garden of uncontacted people of the Upper Humaitá River, with banana trees and annatto bushes, Acre state, Brazil. © G. Miranda/FUNAI/Survival International

TESTIMONY

TN Pandit, former Director of the Anthropological Survey of India

TN Pandit gave this account to Survival International in early 2025.

“The Sentinelese tribe are not in direct conflict with anyone. Their island is their own and that’s it.

“My first visit to North Sentinel Island was in April 1967. The Andaman Administration had organized a visit and I was invited to join as the only anthropologist. The Chief Commissioner thought that if the State must reach out to the remotest corners of the nation, it should show its presence in a benign way.

“We had policemen with us, but if the Sentinelese were very angry, they could have attacked us. The police could not have done anything. When we came back, an arrow was shot by the Sentinelese, but it was not aimed at any of us. They could have if they wanted to, because they were watching us and hiding in the thick forest, but they were not visible to us.

“We started the gift-dropping missions with the Sentinelese throughout the 1970s and ‘80s. By their gestures, they would show us that they didn’t like our being there and sometimes they shot warning arrows. We kept visiting the island... but they were all the time warning us, “You can’t come and stay.” Sometimes, through gestures, they would say “Not welcome.” Some of the men would turn their backs to us and sit on their haunches on the ground. Their facial gestures were of disapproval and distrust. They would be using angry words and language all the time.

“After 1991, the visits were stopped by the government. We didn’t want to disturb their lives without any purpose. The government is committed to maintaining the status quo. I support this policy fully. Then two fishermen went in 2006, they were killed because they were illegally poaching around there. But then an American citizen went in, Chau. He went to propagate Christianity...but ultimately, he invited violence against himself. Once he tried to go there and got a minor injury. The second time, he was killed. The Sentinelese are not an aggressive people, they are not attacking their neighbors, only defending their island. So that’s the situation today, they remain peaceful because the government is not interested in interfering or disturbing their life in any way. Today, they know their neighbors have technology, but they say: “To you, your own. We are fine with our own things.”

“The Sentinelese received great publicity when Chau was killed and afterwards all kinds of comments were made, but I stand by one thing: they do not go out to do violence. But it’s possible some very irresponsible people — perhaps poachers coming from other countries — might have done violence against the Sentinelese. Now the Sentinelese remain away from the rest of the world, the most isolated community in the world.”

8.2 Environmental and ecological expertise

“

Uncontacted peoples... know the forest far better than we do. The Akuriyos have 35 words for honey, and other [Indigenous people] look up to them as being the true masters of the emerald realm...it's people like these that know things that we don't, and they have lots of lessons to teach us.”

*Dr. Mark Plotkin, ethnobotanist, 2015*²³⁵

Living in and immediately reliant on nature for countless generations, uncontacted Indigenous peoples have built up vast and exceptional knowledge of their forests and broader environment. This botanical expertise allows them to use many hundreds of plant species for food, medicine, tools, daily or sacred objects, and house construction. Their knowledge also includes a sophisticated understanding of their wider ecosystems. This helps them both to protect the natural world, and to withstand the challenges it poses. The uncontacted and recently contacted Indigenous peoples of the Andaman Islands are understood to have used their knowledge of the ocean's movements to survive the devastating 2004 tsunami.

As is clear from the testimonies of people in initial contact, as well as from the knowledge of other contacted peoples, uncontacted Indigenous peoples have an immense array of ingenious applications for forest produce. The Yanomami people — most of whom are contacted although around 13 groups live without contact in the Brazilian and Venezuelan Amazon — use about 500 different species of plants in their daily lives. The Shompen people of Great Nicobar Island in the Indian Ocean use the White Dhup tree to make incense, mosquito repellent and even a type of chewing gum. The Awá in Brazil use the resin of the *maçaranduba* tree to make torches so they can hunt at night.

The botanical expertise of uncontacted Indigenous peoples includes a wealth of medical knowledge. The Hongana Manyawa of Halmahera, Indonesia, are experts at preparing remedies to cure a range of familiar diseases, or to enhance their daily lives. Bodik, a formerly uncontacted Hongana Manyawa man, told Survival of medicines his people prepare from rainforest plants. These include a cure for stomach aches made from ginger, forest spinach and a specific red leaf that his people gather in the forest. Other roots are used to increase physical stamina. He told Survival the roots allow the Hongana Manyawa, who are nomadic and regularly need to travel great distances, to “walk for days and easily climb the mountains and the hills.”

Their expertise also encompasses the wider patterns and behavior of the ecosystems in which they are immersed. Having lived for centuries in their territories, uncontacted peoples and their ancestors have undoubtedly witnessed — and survived — huge climatic, environmental, and seismic changes which are incorporated into their knowledge of their environment and the ecosystem around them.

When the strongest earthquake ever recorded in Asia hit in December 2004, triggering a devastating tsunami, Survival was greatly concerned for the Indigenous inhabitants of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The earthquake’s epicenter was just south of the islands. It was so powerful that the coral

Korowai mother and child returning to their tree-house after gathering food and medicinal plants in the forest. © Survival International



reefs which surround the island of the uncontacted Sentinelese were lifted up above the ocean's surface. The tsunami waves, reaching up to 15 meters in parts of the islands, took just 15 minutes to hit the archipelago²³⁶.

Hundreds of thousands of people died, and yet, remarkably, the vast majority of uncontacted Sentinelese and Shompen and the recently contacted Ang survived. Some of this may have been luck — at that time of year, the nomadic Ang were mostly inland when the tsunami struck, as were the Shompen. But well-preserved ancestral knowledge of the islands and the ocean is also likely have played a role. Professor Anvita Abbi, an expert in Andamanese languages, explains how their languages reveal their nuanced understanding of the ocean's movements, noting that the Great Andamanese have six different terms to describe distance from the seashore²³⁷. She explains that these peoples have distinct vocabulary to understand and describe the ocean's patterns, including a tsunami. "[The] tribes of the Andaman, Jarawa [Ang], Onge and Great Andamanese saved themselves as their knowledge about the tsunami was intact in their language. They interpreted the patterns of waves and sea churning and ran to a safe place."²³⁸ Numerous government officials, anthropologists and environmentalists working in the islands described how the Indigenous peoples' understanding of the sea's movements helped them anticipate danger and move to safety, escaping disaster.²³⁹

A few days after the tsunami, an Indian coastguard flight captured an image which would go on to become famous — a Sentinelese man standing on his island, aiming arrows at the approaching helicopter.



The Yanomami people, Brazil

The Yanomami, numbering around 45,000 people and including up to 13 uncontacted groups, live in an area of the Amazon straddling the Brazil-Venezuela border. On the Brazilian side, covering an area the size of Portugal, the Yanomami Indigenous Territory is the largest area of tropical rainforest under Indigenous control. Most Yanomami started coming into sustained contact with outsiders from the 1940s onwards.

Like all Indigenous peoples, the Yanomami are expert scientists, doctors, botanists and zoologists. This knowledge is core to their self-sufficiency and sustainable use of their biodiverse forest home. They use 500 species of plant for food, medicines, tools, and for building their vast *yanos* or *shaponos* (communal houses which can house up to 400 people). They consume more than 40 kinds of wild honey, 11 species of mushrooms, and 50 species of fish. They use nine species of plant just for fishing. By grinding the leaves of certain species of vines and plants, they create a juicy, non-toxic pulp which is poured into streams and temporarily stuns the fish. The fish then rise to the surface of the water, enabling the Yanomami to scoop them up in large baskets which they weave themselves; in 2019, Yanomami

women presented to the world a newly-discovered species of fungus which they use in basket making. It has been given the scientific name *Marasmius yanomami*.

In 2015, Hutukara Yanomami Association, an organization which represents Yanomami groups across Brazil, published the first book on traditional medicines in a Yanomami language. It catalogues 101 species of plants, six fungi and 14 insects which were collected in just one village by Indigenous researchers, many of them women. This manual represents only part of a much larger body of Yanomami knowledge of medicinal plants.

On a spiritual level, Yanomami shamans are responsible for the health of the community, which is directly linked to the health of the forest and environment. Every element of the natural world — animals, birds, insects, mountains, rivers, the sun and moon — has a spirit or *xapiri*, which are essential to the work of the shamans in maintaining order and balance between the different worlds. Shamans enter into contact with the *xapiri* by inhaling a hallucinogenic snuff, *yakoana*. This is made from ash mixed with certain tree barks or plants.

In Yanomami cosmology, the shamans and their *xapiri* are vital not only for restoring the health and well-being of the Yanomami and their forest, but for all of humanity in the fight against climate change — as Yanomami shaman, Davi Kopenawa explains: “We shamans look after the sky, so it doesn’t fall down. We look after the earth, so it doesn’t sink. And we look after *Motokari* (the sun) so that we don’t all burn to death. [...] We look after our universe, so that we can continue living in this world. We, and you.”

Following the decades-long illegal invasion of their land by gold miners and its devastating impacts, the health of Yanomami communities has collapsed, threatening their future and the preservation of their ecological knowledge. Malaria

and bronchial diseases introduced by the miners are rife, and fish and water are contaminated with toxic mercury. The miners have destroyed thousands of hectares of forest and gouged deep craters which are breeding grounds for malarial mosquitoes. Heavily armed criminal gangs and miners have repeatedly attacked communities and murdered Yanomami people. At the height of the invasion under former president Jair Bolsonaro, due to ill health and fear of attack, Yanomami people were unable to tend their forest gardens and hunt and fish — leaving many families severely malnourished.

The Yanomami’s ecological knowledge underpins their resilience. When all illegal miners are expelled, it will be fundamental to those communities impacted by mining as they seek to restore their forest, rivers and livelihoods.²⁴⁰



Yanomami women and children gathering leaves to turn into timbó, a poison used to stun fish, 2010. © Fiona Watson/Survival International

8.3 Environmental stewardship

“

[Uncontacted Indigenous peoples] have lived like this for a long time and want to continue to do so! They are the ones who truly care for the forest. It is the Moxihatëtëa and all the other uncontacted peoples of the Amazon who still look after the last forest. But the whites don't know this, because they don't understand the language of these people. White people just think, “What are they doing here?” and when the whites arrive, they bring their epidemics with them.”

Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, Brazil, 2020

In a context of widespread environmental devastation and climate change caused by human activity, uncontacted Indigenous peoples' flawless track record of environmental stewardship stands out. Like many other Indigenous peoples, they expertly maintain the health and biodiversity of their territories, with their practices often rooted in a spiritual reverence for nature, and an understanding of reciprocal relationships with other species.

Humanity has been shaping the environment for hundreds of thousands of years, most obviously altering our immediate surroundings. In the last 150 years, industrialized societies have gone further, disastrously affecting our climate. This contrasts starkly with the sensitive, sustainable and respectful stewardship of the environment by uncontacted and many other Indigenous peoples.

Today, all known uncontacted peoples live in forests. Their lands are high in biodiversity²⁴¹, and when uncontacted peoples live in their territories without incursions by outsiders, their lands often appear from the air as green 'islands' surrounded by areas of deforested and degraded land. The home of the Guajajara and the majority of the uncontacted Awá peoples, an area in Brazil known as Arariboia, is sharply delineated from the surrounding areas, which have been heavily logged and depleted. The same applies for the Ayoreo Totobiegosode, whose territory is one of the last patches of forest in the central Chaco of Paraguay.



A young Shompen man returns home after crab fishing. © Anthropological Survey of India

Some uncontacted peoples live on islands — in oceans, or, in the case of one *Āwa* (*Avá Canoeiro*) group, a huge fluvial island, Bananal Island, in the Araguaia River in the Brazilian Amazon. On the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Indian Ocean, the largest areas of standing rainforest are on the territories belonging to uncontacted or recently contacted tribes like the Sentinelese, Ang and Shompen. Throughout their history, the Shompen maintained the rich biodiversity of their island, known as Great Nicobar, and supported the flourishing of a huge variety of endemic species. The world's smallest known eagle, the Great Nicobar serpent eagle, is just one of more than 50 animal species found nowhere else on Earth. As skilled, ecologically attuned hunters — and true conservationists — the Shompen have maintained thriving wildlife populations for possibly thousands of years while living off what they have hunted and gathered on the island. After millennia of Shompen guardianship over Great Nicobar, 95 percent of the island is still covered in rainforest, in stark contrast to environmental destruction elsewhere.

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples have not studied Western concepts of conservation. Yet they, like many other Indigenous peoples, are trained in their own ecological knowledge and practice which they have developed over thousands of years, building a highly intricate understanding of the lands they inhabit. As scientists are only now understanding, much of the Amazon rainforest (which covers over 3 million square kilometers) was actively planted and managed by pre-Columbian Indigenous populations.²⁴²

Environmental stewardship by uncontacted Indigenous peoples, as we have learned from Indigenous people in initial contact, is often imbued with a spiritual reverence for nature, and guided by reciprocal relationships with other species.

These philosophies are rooted in a pragmatic understanding of the natural world and people's relationship to it, one that differs from some biblical beliefs about humanity's "dominion" over nature²⁴³ or the increasing move in the Global North to commodify or 'financialize' nature.²⁴⁴ Uncontacted people's total reliance on their environment teaches them that damage to nature harms individuals and society. Their isolation trains them through necessity, and equips them with unique environmental knowledge.

Around the world, uncontacted peoples are guarding and boosting key areas of global biodiversity and critical carbon sinks, the 'lungs of the planet.' When uncontacted peoples thrive, so does the natural world.

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples are self-sufficient, healthy, thriving, living expertly in their environments, and managing and protecting their forests better than anyone else could.



The Hongana Manyawa people, Indonesia

There are around 3,500 Hongana Manyawa people living on Halmahera, in the Maluku Islands of Indonesia. Many have been contacted and settled; 500 or more live in the lush rainforest of Halmahera, choosing to avoid contact with outsiders. In their own language, Hongana Manyawa means ‘people of the forest’, and their lives are very literally connected to their rainforest from birth to death.

When a Hongana Manyawa baby is born, the child’s umbilical cord is planted with the seeds of a tree, helping to grow the rainforest at the same time as the community, rooting each new life to the rainforest. When they die, their bodies are placed back in the trees, in a sacred area of the rainforest.

Two Hongana Manyawa men processing sago, one of their staple foods. © Garry Lotulung

The Hongana Manyawa think of the rainforest as a parent and as *Manga Wowango* (a source of life). They believe trees possess souls like humans, so they do not cut them down even to make houses, just harvesting the sticks, branches and leaves they need. When gathering plants for food and medicine, the Hongana Manyawa perform rituals to ask permission from the plants, and leave offerings out of respect.

Many Hongana Manyawa were contacted and forced into settlement from the 1970s to the 1990s. Huge numbers got sick and died — the survivors refer to this time as “the plague” — as they were moved from their forest homes with palm-leaf roofs to houses with sheet-metal roofs. One Hongana Manyawa person told Survival that this made them feel “like animals in a cage”.

Now there are mining companies threatening their forest home, and the very survival of the uncontacted Hongana Manyawa.

The Hongana Manyawa’s way of living in and with their land reinforces their deep reverence for the rainforest. In doing so, it also helps to defend and maintain the forest for future generations. Their forest must be protected from industrial attacks and from this new wave of colonizers, and their rights and choices respected. The Hongana Manyawa need us to take action to ensure that they can continue living in their forest home that they have guarded for countless generations.

9. Resistance

“

We Kinja are warrior people, we are tough people, and we will continue living here. We are going to fight for these uncontacted Indigenous people even if the government doesn’t care. We will fight for them!”

Kinja (Waimiri Atroari) leaders, 2019²⁴⁵

“

There were a lot of invaders coming in to our land. They came here with a lot of merchandise. Then one day the Waiãpi got angry with them because we got ill ... flu, malaria, measles the Waiãpi died a lot from measles at that time. So one day we kicked them out. Together, we formed a warrior group to go after the prospectors, to catch them all. They were spoiling the land, leaving a lot of craters. Fish were dying. The Waiãpi were dying. That’s why we were angry. We burnt their plane so that they wouldn’t come back.”

Waiãpi (Wajãpi) survivor of contact, Brazil, to Survival, 2008

Logging companies are felling the Mashco Piro's forest in Peru. Cattle ranchers are leveling and occupying the forest surrounding the uncontacted people of the Ituna Itatá territory in Brazil. Land speculators are marking trees in the territory that an uncontacted people shares with the Karipuna in Brazil, in preparation for a land grab. Construction companies are lining up to destroy millions of trees on the forested island of the uncontacted Shompen. All uncontacted peoples are under attack. In the face of land theft and invasion, uncontacted tribes continue to fight for their survival — and they consistently make clear that they will defend their territories and resist contact in any way they can.

Contacted relatives and other Indigenous neighbors are also battling to prevent annihilation and to ensure that uncontacted peoples' rights are upheld. So are regional, national and continent-wide Indigenous organizations, along with allies around the world — including Survival.



This cattle ranch was established on Kinja (Waimiri Atroari) land by the Paranapanema Mining Co, 1981. The Kinja were first contacted in the 1970s when the government bulldozed a highway through their land. Hundreds died from disease and in violent confrontations with army units sent in to stop the Indigenous resistance. © William Milliken/Survival International

TESTIMONY

Gilberto Mainguejai Etacore, Ayoreo people, Paraguay

Mainguejai is a young Ayoreo Totobiegosode man, 24, whose group made first contact in 2004, when he was 3 years old. He is now settled in Chaidi, a Totobiegosode community, in Paraguay. He gave this account to Survival International in March 2025.

“I was born in the forest, before contact, close to the [Arocojadi] community, in a hidden place. That’s what my mother says. Because they made a camp for a little while, and I was born there.

“She told me everything. My grandmother and, I think, my aunt, and my grandfather and others: they are all in the forest and there is nothing here [outside of the forest for them]. When we arrived here [after contact], the oldest people in the community died. My mother’s father was one of them.

“Many more are still in the forest. My family. My uncles and my nephews, all of them. I worry a lot, because sometimes I think about where they are. Because of the bulldozers. I always

think about how the noise reaches them. I think they live in the center of our territory, because there you don't hear anything. There is no noise from the bulldozers.

"But I think they hunt further away and then they go back to the center. They make those camps when they look for food. And then they go back again. But it takes a long time ... They walk a long way and stay there, two or three years there and then they go back. Sometimes they plant [seeds]...If there is a lot of food, you can be happy [in the forest].

"My dream is to meet them and for them to meet me too, now that I am an adult. But I'm always worried that there will be problems, and it's more difficult because of the diseases we have here. It's better for them to stay there, in a place where nothing bad happens to them.

"The colonizers who invade the territory are going to be in more danger than they know. If a [non-Ayoreo person] comes to our territory, [the uncontacted people] will kill him because they are afraid of him. If he wants to contact one of us, if he comes close, they shoot [their spears] because they get scared. [The government] must remove those who are colonizing our territory. It is worrying.

"My wish is that the government hands over the titles to us to protect our territory. Let [the uncontacted Ayoreo] stay there in peace. That's the best thing for me. And that the non-Ayoreo who are there are removed. They are invading our land."

An Ayoreo man sets off on a hunting trip through a gate to one of the countless ranches that have taken over his people's land. The sign reads "Private property. No Entry." © Gerald Henzinger/Survival International



9.1 Distance & defiance

“

Because we share the same territory, there were always indirect or unexpected approaches between the Indigenous people with long years of contact with non-Indigenous society and those which remain in ‘voluntary isolation’, that is, who avoid contact. We know this because of specific signs and codes left by them in the middle of the forest, such as obstructing the paths, a clear sign that they do not want anybody using their tracks.”

Wino Këyshëni, also known as Beto Marubo, Indigenous leader in the Javari Valley, Brazil, 2019²⁴⁶

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples are acutely aware when others invade their territory, and almost invariably do all they can to refuse contact. This includes fleeing to different parts of their forest; leaving signs, snares or traps to warn off outsiders; brandishing weapons and firing arrows; or attacking those who come too close. Their clearly expressed wishes to refuse contact must be respected.

Expert observers, uncontacted people are constantly alert to movements in the forest and are fully aware of outsiders encroaching on their territories — even from several kilometers away. In first-hand testimonies, people in initial contact have explained how their ears, attuned to the sounds of the forest, are able to pick up even the hum of a far-distant chainsaw or the arrival of a logging truck²⁴⁷. Once aware of invasions, they relocate their camps or adjust their hunting patterns, moving frequently to avoid the outsiders and to find quieter patches of forest where animals they hunt can still be found. Peoples such as the Awá in Brazil are believed to have stopped cultivating garden crops, shifting to more nomadic living to escape from encroaching loggers and others. Uncontacted Indigenous peoples flee as a survival strategy, fully aware of the devastation forced contact could bring them, and often after having witnessed its fatal effects on their relatives.

In many cases, uncontacted peoples may have had contact before withdrawing, whether recently or historically. This has sometimes come through intertribal trade, or fleeting encounters with Indigenous neighbors while hunting. Some groups had longer periods of contact, for example following enslavement during the Amazonian rubber boom. There are many accounts — from the Amazon and elsewhere — of Indigenous people who have had some contact with outsiders, whether brief or prolonged, recent or historical, and then decided to withdraw from contact. Many Polahi families returned to the Sulawesi rainforest after being contacted and settled by the Indonesian government in the late 20th century. In Brazil, Tamandua Piripkura, one of three known surviving Piripkura people, returned to the forest after making contact in the late 1980s in the aftermath of massacres. Wamaxué Awá and his brothers were first contacted in 2009. The brothers returned to the forest, withdrawing from contact, while Wamaxué stayed; he now says he thinks their life in the forest is better than his.



Baita and Tamandua, two Piripkura men, with FUNAI's Jair Candor, who has worked for over 30 years to defend the lands of uncontacted peoples. Still from the film "Piripkura."

Uncontacted groups still flee when faced with an immediate threat to their survival, such as the presence of invaders nearby. But sometimes under extreme pressure — when fleeing is not an option, or when they feel a clearer message must be sent — they are driven to more assertive action. Recent videos from Halmahera, including those recorded by road construction workers, show uncontacted Hongana Manyawa people shouting and throwing what appear to be plants and stones towards those invading their territory. Aerial footage from helicopters and planes passing over North Sentinel Island in the Indian Ocean or over the Amazon show uncontacted Indigenous people pointing bows and arrows at those passing overhead. Uncontacted peoples create physical signs in their forests as warnings not to enter their territory. Uncontacted peoples in northern Peru leave crossed spears jammed into the ground on hunting trails, while the uncontacted peoples of the Massaco Indigenous Territory in Brazil are among those who create elaborate booby traps with wooden stakes sharpened with rodent teeth. Others create barriers or signs with wood.²⁴⁸

“

[During government monitoring missions in uncontacted people's territory] it is necessary to identify dangers on the route and traces left by the uncontacted Indigenous people. Often, these traces and dangers are one and the same, as is the case with stakes, booby traps measuring 20 cm on average, made from ipê or aroreira wood, sharpened with an agouti's tooth and buried by the Indigenous people along the trail to protect their territory from invasion. The traps are installed in strategic places that are essential for access by those entering the territory of the uncontacted Indigenous people of the Massaco Indigenous Land.”

FUNAI press release, 2019²⁴⁹

Uncontacted Indigenous people have at times, as is their right, initiated friendly contact out of curiosity or to obtain goods — although those they contact must still be careful about spreading disease. At other times, uncontacted people have wounded or killed outsiders when their territories are being invaded and they feel under threat. In 2020, Rieli Franciscato, a Brazilian government expert who worked to protect Indigenous lands, was killed by an arrow shot by uncontacted people in the Uru Eu Wau Wau Indigenous territory. Their land is under attack

from ranchers and loggers, who are burning and destroying the forest. It is likely the uncontacted people mistook Rieli — who they could not have known was one of their strongest allies — for one of the many enemies threatening their survival. American John Allen Chau was killed by the Sentinelese when he landed on their island on an illegal mission to convert them to Christianity.

If no one threatens their lives or land, such desperate acts of self-defense are unnecessary. Uncontacted Indigenous peoples have the right to refuse contact and do so clearly — their wishes must be respected.



The Shompen people, Great Nicobar, India

Living isolated on the island of Great Nicobar in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands archipelago of India, most of the Shompen have no contact with the outside world.

But the Shompen are very much aware of the dangers that contact brings — particularly disease. In 1990, an Andaman and Nicobar Administration report stated: ‘The Shompen bands which have had frequent contact with outsiders...have either been totally annihilated or the population of (the) band has dwindled’.

That devastation taught the Shompen that to survive they must refuse contact, and they have developed excellent techniques to prevent diseases entering their communities. The few Shompen who leave the forest to collect and exchange resources with outsiders take great care before returning to the island’s interior and sharing them among other Shompen families.

They have been seen quarantining in special houses a safe distance away from their communities until they are confident



they are not carrying any diseases they could pass on. The 1990 report stated: “Our team was allowed only up to these “out-houses”...Our attempt to reach the main camp...about 50 meters away from the “out-houses” was resisted by throwing spears (we escaped narrowly) as the Shompens of this region strongly believe that outsiders carry diseases and (the team’s) visit to the camps would bring those diseases to them.”

The report continues, “because of their zealous guard and the bellicosity against any contacts with outsiders, they are the least affected and, as such, they are healthier than those who have contacts with others.”

Yet the current Indian government’s plan to transform Great Nicobar into the “Hong Kong of India” will bring catastrophic upheaval to the Shompen and their rainforest. Few, if any, Shompen have any idea of the mega-project set to rip their forest to shreds and bring 650,000 settlers and almost a million tourists and other visitors each year onto their small island. Their forest will be ripped up, and quarantining will be impossible.

The Shompen have the right to live as they choose in their own land, the right to reject contact — and the right to survive. For this to happen, the mega-project must be scrapped and any contact with outsiders must remain on their own terms.

A group of Shompen men in the Great Nicobar Island rainforest. © Survival International

9.2 Neighbors on the front line

“

What do I say to the planet? What do I ask from the planet? What can I offer the uncontacted people? I'm going to help in the area of protection, monitoring and control with the relevant bodies, like FUNAI [Brazilian government Indigenous affairs agency]. We need to protect them, so they can live their lives in peace — live in the forest and use the forest wisely.”

Manoel Jocemir de Paula Sabóia, Huni Kuin Indigenous leader, Brazil, 2019

“

If the outsiders keep clearing the forest, our uncontacted relatives won't have anywhere to live. They have already destroyed their own land. Now they are destroying ours.”

Porai Picanerai, an Ayoreo Totobiegosode man first contacted in 1986, Paraguay, to Survival in 2007

Many Indigenous people who live close to uncontacted peoples are fierce advocates for their rights, working hard to prevent threats to uncontacted peoples and their forests. They may be recently contacted themselves, close relatives, distant relatives or neighbors of uncontacted people — but they understand and powerfully defend their right to be uncontacted and their land rights. This may include avoiding their territory, educating others, speaking out, informal land monitoring, or formal, well-organized land protection initiatives. These ‘Forest Guardians’ are a crucial line of defense for uncontacted peoples in some areas. As land defenders, they gain powerful enemies, and many have been murdered — but they remain fiercely determined to protect uncontacted peoples’ rights.

A large number of those powerfully championing uncontacted people’s rights were themselves born into communities without outside contact, and often still have relatives living without contact. They may have seen relatives killed by violence and disease and have a personal understanding of the dangers and trauma brought by forced contact. Other Indigenous allies are neighbors from different tribes, who have a deep understanding of and respect for their uncontacted neighbors’ determination to remain uncontacted.

“

Our wary relatives are being threatened in their traditional territories in Peru and Brazil by concessions to oil and logging companies and the opening of highways, not to mention the illegal drug trade, which makes communities extremely vulnerable. There is a great risk they will cease to exist in a short space of time. That's why we want to continue the exchanges with the Yine in Peru and the awareness workshops with the people who live on both sides of the border. We need to strengthen the work the Manchinieri/Yine people have developed for the protection of our wary kin.”

Lucas Manchinieri, Brazil, 2019²⁵⁰

Contacted Indigenous people whose territories are shared with or neighbor uncontacted people's land generally ensure that they never use the same area of the forest — sometimes explicitly to avoid risk of passing on potentially fatal infectious diseases. They also educate their young people about not forcing contact. Beto Marubo, an Indigenous leader in the Javari Valley, Brazil, explains, “Those who grew up in the Javari Valley since childhood have been told to avoid encounters with the uncontacted people or have had to deal with the presence of these groups, as we share the same territory.”²⁵¹

Sometimes, uncontacted people approach nearby Indigenous villages in search of useful items such as machetes — tools which they cannot make themselves but which they have sometimes gained through previous trade, raids on villages, or contact moments in their people's past. Seeking metal tools or other goods should never be understood as uncontacted peoples expressing a desire for sustained contact. Aware of this, some Indigenous peoples in the Amazon have protocols to temporarily vacate their villages, or to clean and pass over goods without contact. This protects the uncontacted people from contact, and their Indigenous neighbors from raids. The Huni Kuin in Acre, Brazil, for example, marked out some of their shared land where uncontacted peoples can live “peacefully” and built a “Gift and Surveillance House” between two rivers, where they leave tools, metal pans and bananas.²⁵² Some Yine communities in Peru have gardens on the edge of their villages, from which uncontacted Mashco Piro can take produce. Some Indigenous peoples have relocated their villages — in the Javari Valley, Kanamari, Matsés (Mayoruna) and Marubo communities moved to allow more space to uncontacted peoples.²⁵³

“

We raised awareness about the presence of uncontacted people. Each to his own. Each in their own place. But looking after each other, talking to each other, not personally, but spiritually connected. It is our dream to work like that with the uncontacted people. Us, without interfering with them, and them, without interfering with us.”

Manoel Jocemir de Paula Sabóia of the Huni Kuin, talking to ISA, 2019²⁵⁴

Many Indigenous peoples actively monitor their uncontacted neighbors’ and relatives’ territories, establishing anything from surveillance posts to trained and equipped land protection initiatives. Sometimes these are informal community efforts, while some peoples have created formal organizations.

The Kinja in the Brazilian Amazon (also known as the Waimiri Atroari), have spent decades helping to protect the land and rights of the neighboring uncontacted people known as the Pirititi. The Kinja avoid Pirititi territories, erect barriers to keep loggers out, have built a guard post to monitor the territory, and repeatedly lobby the Brazilian authorities to recognize and protect Pirititi land.

“

We are here to keep a lookout so invaders do not enter. We keep up surveillance along our border. We don’t go too far into their territory. We stay close to the border, carrying out surveillance so the invaders don’t get in... We had to take the lead in defending them.”

Ewepe Marcelo, Kinja leader, Brazil, 2019

Tobelo people in Halmahera, Indonesia, monitor the territory of their uncontacted Hongana Manyawa neighbors, and speak out about their right to remain uncontacted. The Ayoreo Totobiegosode in Paraguay have set up monitoring posts to track deforestation in the land of their uncontacted relatives, and report on illegal incursions. Nicobarese people on Great Nicobar island, India speak out about the rights of their “Shompen brothers” to live safely in their rainforest. The UNIVAJA alliance of Indigenous organizations in the Javari Valley, Brazil, set up the UNIVAJA Surveillance Team (Equipe de Vigilância da UNIVAJA) in 2020, which runs protection posts with mobile patrol units, including areas where uncontacted peoples live. Also in Brazil, the Uru Eu Wau Wau in Rondônia, and the Ka’apor in Maranhão have similar Forest Guardian initiatives to protect the territories they share with uncontacted Indigenous relatives and neighbors. These efforts are particularly necessary where government action is weak or lacking. In fact, state omission is often the motivation for Indigenous Guardian groups.



The Guajajara Guardians in the north-eastern Brazilian Amazon monitor, patrol and protect the land that they share with uncontacted Awá people. They patrol on foot and on quad bikes and motorcycles, send drones out over the forest to look for illegal logging camps, and have set up two-way radio posts. As of 2025, they have shut down 70 illegal roads in Arariboia Indigenous Territory. As all Forest Guardians do, they are putting their lives on the line with this work. In recent years, six Guardians in Arariboia have been killed in retaliation by heavily armed loggers and others. But they continue. They know that without their work, the uncontacted people could be wiped out.

“

We will not allow forced contact because it will be another genocide of a people... of Indigenous people who don't want contact.”

Olimpio Guajajara, Guajajara Guardian, Brazil, to Survival, 2016

Members of the Uru Eu Wau Wau Guardians patrol their territory, which has been subjected to repeated invasions by loggers, landgrabbers and miners. © Gabriel Uchida/ Survival International

CASE STUDY

Guajajara Guardians, Brazil

“

The Awá are very threatened, and they are surrounded by pesticides — the cattle ranchers are polluting the water they drink. If the uncontacted Awá are not protected, they will disappear. They are the most vulnerable people. We are very worried. We have planted inhame [yams] for them.”

Olimpio Guajajara, an Indigenous Forest Guardian, Arariboia, Brazil

In the northeastern Amazon, there are Indigenous Guajajara people doing all that they can to safeguard what remains of the forest they share with their uncontacted Awá neighbors. A decade ago, they formed the Guajajara Guardians, a group of land defenders that monitors their land, known as Arariboia, for signs of illegal invasions. They shut down roads bulldozed by loggers, remove equipment, put out fires, and report invasions to the authorities. With the government having failed to stop criminal invasions, the Guardians’ work is crucial: they have already shut down 70 of the 72 illegal logging roads that existed when they began.

This work is relentless, and dangerous. The loggers keep coming, and now cattle ranchers are seizing the logged areas of forest, setting fires and contaminating the water. The colonizers are heavily armed and violent, and their attacks on the Guardians usually go unpunished. They have killed six Guardians in the Arariboia Indigenous territory alone. Tainaky Tenetehar was shot in 2019 in an ambush that killed his friend Paulo Paulino Guajajara. Yet he continues to patrol — knowing how high the stakes are.

“The uncontacted Awá are suffering a lot,” says Tainaky.

“They have almost no food as the loggers are closing in and destroying everything. They don’t know what is happening outside their land, but we Guajajara can see the huge impact of the destruction of the forest. The Awá have been here since the beginning of time, over 1000 years. The whites came to the Guajajara a long time ago and told us we were not “civilized” ... All this time later we are still looked down on. We know it will be the same for the Awá if the whites contact them. The Awá will die with contact from disease.”

The Guardians are not giving in. They continue to put their lives on the line to protect the forest for their families and the uncontacted Awá. They see no other option.

“We continue, as our forest is our life. Without it, we would all be dead,” said Olimpio Santos Iwyramu Guajajara, in a message from all the Guardians. “Our uncontacted Awá relatives also live in the forest. They cannot survive if it’s destroyed. As long as we live, we will fight for the uncontacted Awá, for all of us, and for nature.”



Two Guajajara Guardians on patrol with a drone in Arariboia Indigenous Territory. Paulo Paulino Guajajara (left) was later killed in an ambush by loggers. © Sarah Shenker/Survival International

9.3 Indigenous movements fight back

“

We have stood up to congressmen who wanted our brothers and sisters in voluntary isolation and initial contact to disappear. Don’t be fooled. They want to set Indigenous people against Indigenous people. They are our brothers in voluntary isolation and initial contact, and we are all together in this fight.”

Roberto Tafur Shupingahua, Kapanawa people, Peru, 2024

“

No more massacres! We will not allow any more invasions! It is very important to mobilise the Indigenous peoples and organizations of the Amazon, and the whole of civil society, to prevent the territories where isolated Indigenous peoples live from being handed over to loggers, landowners, miners and other forest predators.”

Angela Kaxuyana, member of COIAB Executive Committee, Brazil, 2021

Further away from the immediate vicinity of uncontacted peoples' homes, other Indigenous people are engaged in another crucial, and complementary, branch of the battle for their rights and survival. Local, regional and national Indigenous organizations are engaged in political, legal or campaigning fights for uncontacted Indigenous peoples' rights. While specific goals vary, all have land rights and the right to refuse contact at their heart. In a context of continuing anti-Indigenous discrimination, there are nevertheless a growing number of Indigenous politicians who are also taking up this fight in the corridors of power.

From the depths of the forest to the streets and halls of political power in capital cities and TV studios around the world, Indigenous people and their organizations ensure that the struggle of uncontacted Indigenous peoples is not ignored, and push for the protection of their territories. Indigenous organizations such as UNIVAJA, Hutukara, COIAB and APIB in Brazil; AIDSEP, FENAMAD, ORPIO, ORAU and COMARU in Peru; OPIT and UNAP in Paraguay; ORPIA in Venezuela; OPIAC in Colombia; CITMRD, CANOB, and CIDOB in Bolivia; Ome Yasuni, NAWA, CONFENIAE, and CONAIE in Ecuador; AMAN in Indonesia; and others are strong advocates for uncontacted people's rights. This can include campaigning, lobbying and legal work. Some organizations have their own Indigenous lawyers working on national and international cases.

These organizations directly lobby their governments and ensure wide visibility by sharing information on social media, boosted by the increasing availability of internet connections in and around Indigenous villages. They engage with journalists to further amplify their demands. They record videos to share internationally — including through Survival's Indigenous Voices project — and they make films about the issues. They organize protests and delegations to march outside government headquarters in capital cities, or to raise the Indigenous land question internationally through cross-country campaign tours. They lodge legal complaints against governments' and companies' illegal activities which harm uncontacted tribes.

Demands include the calls for “no-go areas” exclusively for uncontacted Indigenous people in Indonesia, the decades-long push for the Peruvian government to demarcate Indigenous Reserves for uncontacted peoples, and the demands that Brazilian authorities conduct expeditions to officially recognize the presence of uncontacted tribes in certain areas. The specific



Shipibo people protest in the Peruvian town of Contamana in support of uncontacted peoples. © ORAU

objectives and legal contexts vary from country to country, but the battles all have at their heart the rights to land and to remain uncontacted.

Indigenous people continue to be subjected to systemic racism and are drastically under-represented in national politics. But in some places they are gaining ground and occupying positions in ministries, national congresses, state governments, and more. These Indigenous representatives in government are often an important force for bringing Indigenous land rights — including uncontacted people's rights — to the center of political debate.



Indigenous people protest during the annual Free Land Camp gathering in Brasília. 2018. © Marcelo Camargo/Agência Brasil

Joenia Wapichana, Brazil's first Indigenous Congresswoman, in office from 2019 to 2023, pushed through pro-Indigenous bills and worked with allies to block anti-Indigenous proposals. She led the way in Brasília by pushing urgent measures to protect Indigenous territories during the COVID-19 pandemic and the genocidal government of Jair Bolsonaro. She later became the first Indigenous person appointed to head FUNAI, Brazil's Indigenous Affairs agency. In 2022, Leonor Zalabata became the first Indigenous person appointed as Colombia's ambassador to the United Nations. Sonia Guajajara, an Indigenous activist from Arariboia, was in 2023 appointed as Brazil's first Minister for Indigenous Peoples. These women, along with other Indigenous politicians in countries where uncontacted peoples live, are important champions for uncontacted peoples' rights.



TESTIMONY

Penti Baihua of the Waorani people, Ecuador

Penti Baihua shared this testimony with Survival in April 2025, in reaction to attempts by US missionary Karen Duffy to make contact with the Taromenane, an uncontacted people closely related to the Waorani.

“Before the contact we lived free in the jungle as Waorani. The missionaries came to make contact [in 1973]. When we left [our home], we suffered. We have had great illnesses because of the contact. We have problems because the government says that our ancestral territory is not ours.

“Living with contact is complicated. It is better for the uncontacted Waorani not to leave the jungle. How does this lady [Karen Duffy] know that the Taromenane want contact? I don’t understand this. What I think is that she wants to seek contact with the isolated ones. She says that they left spears as a sign of gratitude for the gifts brought by her. But I don’t believe that. It is not our culture.

“My Baihuaeri Waorani people are recently contacted. When we lived without contact, we never left spears as an invitation to visit us. That is not for peaceful contact. We have our ways of leaving friendly signals, but that is not one. I don’t want to mention the signals that are an invitation, so she doesn’t take advantage.

“She is a missionary. We want her to respect us and our neighbors in isolation. We, the Baihuaeri Waorani of Bamenó, are owners of our ancestral territory and we have told her that she cannot visit our community or use photos of us. She is not welcome.”

9.4 Non-Indigenous allies

“

What is our work? It is simply to try to monitor the lands so that people cannot interfere in any way in the territory of the uncontacted Indigenous people. No exploitation [of resources] ... nothing ... so that the territory remains intact and the Indigenous people can decide their own future without being forced into anything ... we have been monitoring these peoples for 20 years and we have seen that their population has increased, we discovered that the policy of protecting without contacting works.”

José Carlos Meirelles, Brazilian government protection officer safeguarding uncontacted peoples' land, 2010

The struggle for uncontacted Indigenous peoples' rights is further supported by expert, non-Indigenous allies acting locally, regionally or internationally. In Brazil, this includes government agents or teams, many of whom dedicate their lives to supporting uncontacted Indigenous peoples. Outside government structures, there are anthropologists, linguists, activists, NGOs and some journalists who provide powerful solidarity along with practical support. When backed with resources and experience — and especially with political will — these efforts can save lives and protect the lands and autonomy of uncontacted Indigenous peoples.

In Brazil, where more than 60 percent of all uncontacted peoples live, and where official recognition of and respect for uncontacted people's rights to their land and to remain uncontacted is relatively well established, there can be government agents or teams, who provide direct protection of uncontacted peoples' territories in some areas. Many of these government agents have dedicated years or even decades of their lives to keeping invaders out of the lands of uncontacted peoples across the Brazilian Amazon. Having witnessed the disaster of forced contact firsthand, it was these agents who pushed the no-contact policy adopted by the Brazilian government in the late 1980s. Many have worked throughout the ups and downs of successive governments which have held strongly different attitudes towards Indigenous land protection — including active hostility. They have carried on even when their teams are drastically under-resourced and

under-recognized. Their dedication is crucial to the survival of uncontacted peoples in Brazil.

Outside government, there are NGOs, activist anthropologists, journalists, and other allies doing crucial work. While missionaries seeking to evangelize or convert are a serious danger to uncontacted peoples, some other religious organizations stand as strong advocates and allies for uncontacted peoples' rights.

This work can bring enemies — often dangerous ones. The late Samir Acharya of the Society of Andaman and Nicobar Ecology (SANE) was once described as “the most hated man on Port Blair [the capital of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands]” for his uncompromising fight against logging and in support of the rights of the uncontacted and other Indigenous peoples in the islands.²⁵⁵ Bruno Pereira was an Indigenous rights expert who coordinated the Brazilian government's uncontacted peoples' unit, conducting several land protection operations. After leaving the government during the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, he carried on the struggle, successfully battling alongside Indigenous people of the Javari Valley on the Brazil-Peru border. Bruno and British journalist Dom Phillips, also a supporter of Indigenous rights, were shot dead in the Javari Valley in 2022, by poachers who were probably backed by organized crime. In his last voicemail message to Survival before he was killed, he spoke about being “here in resistance” and wished us “good luck in the fight”.



A handout image released by FUNAI showing Bruno Pereira with Indigenous people in the Javari Valley. © FUNAI

“

I'm going to the Javari again. There's a lot going on there: lots of mining in the area around the Indigenous Territory, very close to the uncontacted groups ... UNIVAJA's monitoring team is doing good work... The persecution and intimidation are not only directed at me, there are many people with me, but all this will pass, I hope, all this will pass. It's been nearly four very intense years... I am here, in resistance, being attacked, but I will not give up ...It's part of every fight, right? Let's see what we rebuild afterwards. ... Good luck in the fight.”

Bruno Pereira in the last voicemail message he sent to Survival before he was killed, 2022

Survival's global campaigning

Since 1969, Survival International has campaigned for the rights of uncontacted peoples all over the world, working with Indigenous peoples and other allies to get the message out across the world. We want as many people as possible to know that uncontacted peoples are facing a brutal and enduring colonialism that violates their rights, destroys their homes, and kills them, because of greed and racism. And we want those with the power to stop these attacks to come under pressure to do so.

Our researchers have built long-term relationships with recently contacted people, with other Indigenous communities, with local and national organizations, and with government representatives and activists in the areas where uncontacted peoples live. We support those working on the ground, and through reports and testimony, and careful use of photos and videos, we share with the international media and campaign targets what is happening — and what needs to happen.

Awareness of uncontacted peoples has grown enormously in recent decades, and it has become harder for governments, companies or others to deny the existence or the rights of uncontacted peoples.

Time and again, Survival's campaigns with Indigenous and other allies show the power of public pressure in ensuring respect for uncontacted Indigenous people's rights. Here are a few examples:

- The Indian government, in the face of a campaign by Survival, SANE and other local organizations in India, abandoned its plan to contact the Sentinelese and shelved its 1990 'Master Plan' to forcibly settle the then-very-recently contacted Ang. In 2004, it announced a policy respecting the Ang's self-determination.
- From 2012 to 2014, a massive campaign by Survival in support of the Awá saw over 57,000 emails sent to the Brazilian Ministry of Justice. Thousands of Survival supporters sent in photographs of the campaign's 'Awáicon' on buildings around the world. The pressure helped bring about the removal of thousands of illegal loggers and ranchers from the Awá territory in the north-eastern Amazon.
- Along with CIVAJA, Pastoral Indigenista da Diocese do Alto Solimões, OPAN, CIMI, COIAB and Terre des Hommes, Survival was part of the successful campaign in the 1980s and 1990s to demarcate the Javari Valley Indigenous Territory in Brazil, home to the densest concentration of uncontacted tribes anywhere in the world.
- From 2021 to 2023, Survival's joint campaign with COIAB, OPI, ISA and OPAN in Brazil helped secure the signing of 'Land Protection Orders' for four territories that are home to uncontacted peoples or groups in Brazil.
- In 2023, Survival worked with AIDSEP, ORPIO and other Peruvian Indigenous organizations to help ensure that a genocidal bill to open up uncontacted people's territories in Peru was shelved. Survival supporters sent almost 17,000 emails to Peruvian politicians and officials: hostile

politicians complained on the floor of Congress about being “bombarded”.

- Survival supporters sent more than 20,000 emails protesting against nickel mining and processing on the land of the uncontacted Hongana Manyawa in Indonesia. Following meetings with Survival about our concerns in 2024, the German chemical giant BASF pulled out of plans for a \$2.6 billion processing project, ensuring the plan was shelved.

Mass public pressure in support of Indigenous people’s resistance is a powerful force to create lasting change. Survival continues to fight alongside Indigenous peoples for the rights of uncontacted peoples globally.

From NGOs, to activist anthropologists and journalists, to government officials and public prosecutors, to teams at regional bodies like the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, a network of non-Indigenous organizations and individuals is backing uncontacted peoples’ right to live as they choose. This network helps make up a powerful force for change. It reinforces uncontacted people’s own resistance, and works alongside Indigenous communities and organizations — who are often risking their lives. Acting together, their work is crucial in ensuring the survival of uncontacted Indigenous peoples, respect for their rights, and the protection of their forests and territories.



During the massive operation, prompted by Survival’s global campaign, to remove illegal loggers from the Awá territory, government agents fly in to an Awá community to update them on progress. © Silvano Fernandes/FUNAI

TESTIMONY



Salomon Dunu, Matsés people, Peru

Salomon Dunu spoke to Survival in 2012, asking us to share this message.

“Life before contact was incredible.

“We lived on the river, and we would travel to the other side to make our gardens. When it was time, we would abandon those gardens to the forest and make new ones in another place. That was how we lived before contact.

“Our uncontacted brothers still live in the forest. We know they’re out there. My own son has seen them. They live like we did before. They move from place to place and when they see a white person they flee. When they hear someone coming, they quickly hide their tracks with leaves and sticks.

“Now I’m asking you to help us. Because the uncontacted people are out there, we want the government to protect the land. We need space to live. We don’t just need space for our gardens and our homes, we need space to hunt. But places

that we use for hunting are being cut up by the oil company [Canadian-Colombian company Pacific Rubiales].

“I want those who support Indigenous people to help the Matsés. Tell the world that the Matsés are firm in our position against the oil company. We do not want it on our land.”



Salomon Dunu, a Matsés man, speaks to a Survival International campaigner about the threat of oil exploration to his people. © Survival International



PART FOUR: The way forward

“

Uncontacted peoples live and survive self-sufficiently, so we, and governments, need to protect their territories from outsiders. Governments need to set aside a budget and get to work. It's no use them having discussions and then not doing anything in practice. We say no more illegal mining! No more environmental crimes! No more violence against Indigenous people!”

Bushe Matis, coordinator of UNIVAJA, Brazil, to Survival, 2023

The Zo'ê people were decimated by disease after being contacted by evangelical missionaries, but their numbers are now growing again. © Fiona Watson/Survival International

10. Conclusions and solutions

“

If we don't support the fight for their rainforest, my uncontacted relatives will just die. The rainforest is everything, it is their heart and life. My parents and siblings are in the rainforest and without support they will die.”

Hongana Manyawa man, Indonesia, speaking anonymously to Survival, 2023

Uncontacted peoples have an unparalleled ability to live well and unaided in their territories — when their rights are respected. Yet they are all at risk from an industrial society that commodifies them and their territories, or dismisses them as insignificant obstacles to ‘development’ or profit. Almost half are on the verge of destruction. But there is hope. If governments recognize and enforce their rights, if industries, companies and other actors respect these rights, and if the public supports their rights, uncontacted Indigenous peoples can survive and thrive.

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples’ territories provide them with food, water, shelter, medicines, and are central to their religious beliefs and cosmology. They depend on their lands — and the health of their lands depends on them. Like many Indigenous peoples, uncontacted peoples are true, expert guardians of their territories.

Despite their expertise, their sophisticated understanding of the world around them and their ability to live off their lands unaided, uncontacted Indigenous people continue to be regarded variously as an exotic distraction, as souls to be saved by self-styled martyrs, or as not fully human obstacles to national development. Most often, they are treated as inconvenient and insignificant, their existence ignored, hidden or outright denied when it gets in the way of lucrative plans for mining, logging, ranching or some other rapacious project of private enterprise and consumption-based society.

This denial of their humanity and their rights ignores their integral role in the world. From the Amazon to India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands, from the Great Chaco to the rainforests of Indonesia, uncontacted Indigenous peoples are a vital part of humankind. They are people living on lands they have owned for thousands of years. These are lands where they form contemporary societies, and have the right to choose how they live, how they raise their children, how they interact with others — and how they don’t.

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples are under attack from continuing colonialism that stereotypes them as primitive, dismisses them as lesser, and values consumption and profit over their rights to their land and to live as they choose. The results are devastating. Following decades of assaults on their lands and rights, half of uncontacted peoples could be wiped out within 10 years if current activities in or around their territories are not stopped. Many are just one highway through their forest,

one mining project on ancestral land, or one virus brought in by obsessive missionaries away from total destruction.

There are many things we do not know about uncontacted people. We often don't know what they call themselves, their languages, their cosmologies or their names. But we do know that every devastating epidemic that rips through a tribe, every unreported massacre, is not just a blow to humankind's diversity — it is a personal and heartbreaking tragedy: to people like Karapiru Awá, whose mother, brothers, sisters and wife were murdered for the resources on their land; or to Ngu Surira, a Cinta Larga woman whose whole village died of disease, leaving only her and her two young sons alone in the forest; or to Boa Sr who, with no one of her Bo people left who shared her language, sang to the birds.

Yet there is hope. Where outsiders are kept out, uncontacted Indigenous peoples thrive. They are resisting, and they have Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies who support them. With the steps set out in this chapter, we could help to secure their rights and future.

“

Isolation is a political decision taken by these populations and must be respected. ... The isolation adopted by these communities must not lead to inaction by those responsible for protecting their territories.”

Daniel Cangussu, FUNAI uncontacted peoples' department, Brazil, 2025

10.1 Governments: legislation

Governments must ratify and incorporate into domestic law all relevant international laws, norms and declarations which uphold Indigenous peoples' rights to their land and territories, to self-determination, to refuse contact if they are uncontacted, and to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), and make specific their application to uncontacted Indigenous peoples. These laws and declarations include ILO 169, ICCPR, ICESCR, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and — where relevant — the American Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

International law enshrines the collective land ownership rights of Indigenous peoples, including uncontacted peoples. Countries with national laws recognizing these rights must ensure that they are specific and comprehensive; those that don't yet have such laws must introduce them (including the recognition of Indigenous peoples on their territories).

In detail, this means that governments must:

- Enact national laws which recognize **Indigenous peoples' collective land ownership**.
- Enact into national law **specific provisions for uncontacted Indigenous peoples' rights to their land and territories**, in line with the provisions of the American Declaration on

- the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the UN Human Rights Council guidelines on peoples living in voluntary isolation.
- Fully enshrine in national law **the principles of self-determination and of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)** of Indigenous peoples, including uncontacted peoples, for any project affecting their lands, territories or resources. This legislation must recognize that uncontacted peoples cannot provide FPIC to projects on their land, and there can therefore be no activity — including logging, oil or mining concessions, roads, hydroelectric dams or other infrastructure projects — on the territories of uncontacted peoples or groups or close by if this will negatively affect their resources.
- Adopt or strengthen **no-contact laws and policies** for uncontacted Indigenous peoples, including explicit outlawing of attempts at contact or any entry into uncontacted peoples' territories by any unauthorized persons including companies, missionaries or tourists.
- Create or strengthen existing **national laws on the active protection of Indigenous territories**, including provisions specific to enforcing no-contact policies, and preventing entry to and activity on uncontacted peoples' land.

10.2 Governments: enforcement

National governments must respect, implement and enforce all new and existing laws recognizing uncontacted Indigenous peoples' rights — to their territories, to refuse contact if uncontacted, and to FPIC — providing all the necessary funding, offering political and institutional support and creating appropriate administrative procedures.

Laws are crucial. But they are worthless without implementation and enforcement.

In detail, this means that governments must:

- **Recognize and map out uncontacted people's territories**, to include all the land they use and have traditionally used, whether on a permanent or a periodic basis, and ensuring buffer zones around them.
- Immediately and urgently create a **no-go zone as soon as there are credible reports of uncontacted peoples' presence in an area**, prohibiting any activity in the area, until their presence can be further investigated.
- Establish **programs to investigate and verify the existence and location of uncontacted Indigenous peoples, without in any way initiating contact, so they and their territories can be recognized and protected.**
- **Immediately cancel any concessions or licenses given to companies operating in the territories of uncontacted Indigenous peoples or groups.**

- Take all relevant measures to **protect these territories against invasions** by outsiders. This includes establishment of protection posts, staffed with trained and competent field officers; adopting protocols to ensure staff on the ground are appropriately immunized and healthy; and ensuring this protection work is fully funded.
- **Monitor the perimeter of uncontacted people's territories**, in order to locate intrusion points and investigate deforestation and collect evidence of attacks. Ensure this is non-intrusive and does not force contact or invade their privacy.
- Establish **no-go zones and create health cordons** if economic developments (mines, dams, roads, settlement projects) are near the territories of uncontacted Indigenous peoples. Establish clear health and communication protocols with trained medical teams on stand-by in the event of unforeseen encounters or contact where diseases might be transmitted.
- **Enforce no-contact policies**, including by taking swift preventive and punitive action against any organization or individual that attempts or risks forced contact of any members of an uncontacted people or group or enters their territories for any purpose other than official land protection.
- When uncontacted peoples' territories are invaded, **locate and stop invasions immediately**; bring those responsible to justice for all crimes committed against uncontacted peoples, including violence against them and destruction of and damage to their territories.
- Ensure that **any existing infrastructure is removed**, whether or not originally sanctioned by the government, and that damage and contamination of territories is made good.

- **Support land protection efforts** by Indigenous Guardians and other relevant community initiatives to protect the lands of uncontacted peoples.
- Support Indigenous and/or other organizations in their efforts to **raise awareness of rights of uncontacted peoples** and the risks of transmitting disease through contact.
- **Communicate clearly about enforcement of the laws** protecting Indigenous territories to dissuade further invasions.
- Where relevant, **make expertise, systems, or other resources available to other governments** and to Indigenous organizations and Guardians groups to support mapping and protection of uncontacted peoples' territories.

10.3 Industry and other private actors

All industries, companies and individuals must recognize and respect that no contact means no consent, and no consent means no contact. Uncontacted peoples cannot be consulted and give their consent — still less Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) — for entry to or projects by outsiders in their territories. They must recognize that the very act of seeking uncontacted Indigenous peoples' consent violates their right to self-determination and would risk their death.

Regardless of the legislative or administrative framework in any given country, any other actor — companies, missionaries, filmmakers, tourists or anyone else — must respect the rights and clearly expressed wishes of uncontacted Indigenous peoples.

In detail, companies, missionaries and other private actors must:

- **Not operate on or source materials from uncontacted Indigenous peoples' territories**, or from companies that are operating on uncontacted peoples' territories, and codify this in their operating policies and standards.
- Recognize and respect that uncontacted peoples cannot be consulted over projects and developments on or around their territories, and that it is **impossible to obtain their free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) to any project**.
- **Not enter or attempt projects** on uncontacted peoples' territories, whether these are officially recognized, in process, or unrecognized but with credible evidence of uncontacted peoples' presence.
- **Remove infrastructure** already placed in these territories, without causing contact.
- **Not attempt any contact with any members of an uncontacted people or group**, whether for evangelization, in an attempt to gain some form of "consent", or for any other reason.
- For mining companies, sign up to and **abide by the standards of the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance (IRMA)**, which recognize the impossibility of consent from uncontacted peoples, and which therefore prohibit mining on uncontacted peoples' territories.

Certifying and standard-setting bodies for industries that might operate on Indigenous land — including mining, oil and gas, forestry, farming, conservation and offsetting bodies — must:

- Include in their standards **a requirement for Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)** for any project on or affecting Indigenous territories.
- Include in their standards **a recognition that FPIC is impossible to obtain from uncontacted Indigenous peoples**, and therefore there can be no activities on their territory.
- **Refuse to certify or allow as members any company operating on the territories of uncontacted Indigenous peoples**, or attempting to make contact with or secure consent from any member of an uncontacted Indigenous people or group.

10.4 Individuals making a difference

It is, ultimately, the public — as citizens, as voters and as consumers — who can put a stop to the forces that drive exploitation of uncontacted Indigenous peoples' land, and risk causing their genocide. By supporting Indigenous peoples and Survival's campaigns, individuals can put pressure on governments, on companies, on industry bodies and other organizations, demanding that they respect uncontacted Indigenous peoples' rights to their lands, to self-determination and to be uncontacted.

It is the demands of our markets — for wooden furniture, oil, luxury jewelry, electric car batteries, mobile phones, social media likes, drugs, and other products — often supported by the action or inaction of our politicians, that drive the exploitation of uncontacted Indigenous peoples' territories for mining, ranching, logging, agribusiness, tourism and other industries. In response to these market forces, governments, companies and individuals seeking profit continue to attempt to steal these lands. The stereotypes that persist in our societies make it easier for the violations of rights and this neo-colonialism to continue.

Time and again, Survival's campaigns with Indigenous and other allies around the world have shown that the public can make a difference. By putting pressure on governments, companies and industry bodies, our movement has ensured that uncontacted peoples' lands are protected, that threats are

removed, and that laws are changed. By joining the fight, you can make a difference.

10.5 The fight goes on

Uncontacted Indigenous peoples around the world have shown they will not give up: they are resisting day in, day out. They are adapting to their changing surroundings and circumstances. Where they are pushed to the edge, they are finding survival strategies, and where outsiders are kept away from their lands, they are thriving. The rest of the world needs simply to respect their wishes and their rights to ensure that they can continue to live as they choose.

Those who predicted that there would be no more uncontacted peoples in the 21st century, or said uncontacted people's continued survival is "unfeasible" have already been proven utterly wrong.

Although uncontacted peoples do not attend roundtables with governments, address the United Nations, or give press conferences to international media outlets, they are leading the way in the fight for their survival, and clearly communicating their message that they wish to be uncontacted and for others to stay off their territories.

As they and their allies continue to resist, the groundswell of public opinion and action in their favor continues to strengthen. This is boosted by the growing recognition of Indigenous

peoples as a vitally important part of humankind, the best guardians of nature, and key allies in the fight against the climate crisis.

The solution is clear, and it should not be hard. We must respect the humanity, dignity and autonomy of uncontacted Indigenous peoples. Having killed so many Indigenous peoples, mostly through colonialism, evangelism, and a thirst for natural resources, industrial societies must now refrain from invading the lands and attacking the lives and livelihoods of uncontacted peoples who have made clear their desire to live in peace.

If we accept their right to live as they choose, then it should not be difficult to uphold the law and protect their territories, so that uncontacted Indigenous peoples can continue to survive — and thrive.

It's one of the most urgent fights of our time.

ANNEX: NOTE ON COUNTING UNCONTACTED PEOPLES

There are at least 196 uncontacted Indigenous peoples and groups worldwide, according to Survival International's calculations. This is how we established that number.

Definitions

Uncontacted: Our definition of uncontacted is that used by the United Nations and organisations working with uncontacted peoples (whatever terminology is used): Indigenous peoples who avoid contact with outsiders and have no permanent relationship with them. This does not discount occasional contact or sightings, including with neighboring Indigenous people in the forest.

Peoples and groups: Some of those counted in our list are entire, distinct Indigenous peoples, each with their own language and way of life, all of whom are uncontacted, notably the Sentinelese on North Sentinel Island in India. Others are sub-groups of bigger peoples, which include both contacted and uncontacted groups which may not interact at all with each other. In some cases — as with the Hongana Manyawa in

Indonesia or the uncontacted Ayoreo in Paraguay — currently contacted people may have previously been part of uncontacted communities, and remember their uncontacted friends and relatives. In other cases — for most groups of uncontacted Yanomami, for example — there may have been no interaction at all for many generations. For many groups in the Amazon, not enough is known about them to know whether they are sub-groups or relatives — close or distant — of other peoples, contacted or uncontacted. In the interest of accuracy, our total therefore refers to “peoples and groups”. (See also below on ‘Reaching a total number.’)

Research methodology

Process: Survival's uncontacted peoples research team compiled data on the presence of uncontacted peoples and the nature and extent of threats against them. Researchers drew from: Survival's long-standing relationships with and knowledge of Indigenous peoples in each region; information gathered on Survival research visits; in-depth interviews with Indigenous contacts, anthropologists and other sources in each country; information from government sources where available; and information from expert ally organisations, including ISA, Opi and CIMI in Brazil and Amazon Conservation Team in Colombia. We have included in our total all groups and peoples whose presence is definitively confirmed or very credibly established by evidence of their presence. In Brazil, FUNAI, the national Indigenous affairs agency, has a well-developed method for determining the presence of uncontacted groups through secondary evidence of their presence. We made additions to the list of widely-known uncontacted peoples only through a rigorous verification process, including in-depth and extensive interviews by Survival researchers and further documentation. In order to establish a group's existence as

credible, Survival required robust evidence, including well-tested direct accounts from at least two sources or evidence verified by the relevant government.

Reaching a total number: Countries with official (or semi-official) registers of uncontacted peoples use differing criteria for counting uncontacted peoples.

In Brazil, where by far the highest number of uncontacted groups live, each uncontacted group is counted separately, even when they are likely part of the same tribe as another uncontacted group. There are a number of distinct groups of uncontacted Yanomami — they live separately, over a widely-dispersed area, and may not have contact with each other, but likely speak the same language or similar dialects, and will have a similar way of life. Brazil counts them as eight separate groups. In cases where an uncontacted group is evidenced only by their hunting trails, abandoned houses and other traces of their presence, it is impossible to know if they are part of the same people as another uncontacted group in a neighboring area. Therefore, counting them separately makes sense.

In countries other than Brazil, official monitoring is far less extensive, making it harder to assess the number of distinct groups. Nearby groups thought likely to be part of the same tribe are counted as one uncontacted people. The Mashco Piro in Peru are counted as one uncontacted people, even though they are comprised of separate groups living in an area nearly half the size of Costa Rica. There are possibly up to five separate uncontacted Yanomami groups in Venezuela, and several separate groups of Ayoreo in Paraguay; in each case, they are counted as being one uncontacted people.

While there are no official figures in Asia and the Pacific, Survival counts uncontacted groups of the same tribe as being a single people for the purposes of this report. This reflects

their shared circumstances, and how they are thought of by those around them. For example, the two or three groups of uncontacted Shompen on Great Nicobar Island are counted as one people.

Survival's total global number is compiled from national figures that use the methodology employed in each country — that is, counting groups in Brazil, and (what are estimated to be) peoples in other countries. This is because our data must make sense within each country's context, and because neither approach is inherently more accurate. Judging whether uncontacted groups are part of a single people can be somewhat arbitrary. So we prefer to use the standard widely used in each country, rather than imposing our own.

If it were possible to consistently count individual groups across each country, the total would certainly be higher than 196.

Our global total is not a simple addition of national statistics. Where it is likely that peoples living in border areas of neighboring countries are counted in two countries' totals, we adjusted to avoid double counting.

Assessing threats: Survival's research team drew on many sources to compile a detailed assessment of the threats faced by these 196 uncontacted peoples and groups. In some cases, such as West Papua, inaccessibility and/or security threats in the region make it difficult to assess the situation. This is particularly the case in parts of the Colombian Amazon. So, although they are in great danger, the peoples who live there are not counted in the totals and the percentages of peoples and groups affected by specific dangers.

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Venezuela: Horonami, ORPIA, Wataniba, Wayamoutheri and others who remain anonymous for their safety

West Papua: West Papua Council of Churches and others who remain anonymous for their safety

Regional / global: GTI-PIACI, Land is Life

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 1. Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation or initial contact have the right to remain in that condition and to live freely and in accordance with their cultures.
 2. States shall, with the knowledge and participation of indigenous peoples and organizations, adopt appropriate policies and measures to recognize, respect, and protect the lands, territories, environment, and cultures of these peoples as well as their life, and individual and collective integrity.

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- 199 Article 1.2 of both conventions
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"When I lived in the forest, I had a good life. Now if I meet uncontacted Awá I'll say, 'There's nothing in the outside for you!'"

Wamaxuá Awá, Brazil

From the forests of Amazonia to the islands of the Pacific, there are Indigenous peoples who choose to live without contact with outsiders.

Aware of the outside world, they reject contact and the continuing colonialism that steals their land and threatens their lives. Mining, logging, agribusiness, criminal gangs, extremist missionaries, even social media adventurers all push uncontacted peoples to the edge of survival. But they are resisting.

This report is the most comprehensive global survey of uncontacted peoples ever compiled. Packed with personal stories and hard facts, it draws on Survival's unique research and decades-long relationships with Indigenous people and movements.

Highlighting the resilience and resistance of uncontacted peoples and their allies, it is a powerful call for action.

