

International

Coronavirus leaves Amazon more vulnerable than ever

Indigenous communities 'could face annihilation without help'

MONTEVIDEO: The indigenous peoples of the Amazon have already seen their homelands ravaged by illegal deforestation, industrial farming, mining, oil exploration and unlawful occupation of their ancestral territories. Now, the coronavirus pandemic has magnified their plight, just as the forest fires are raging once more. The Amazon, the world's largest tropical rainforest, is a vital resource in the race to curb climate change—it spans over 7.4 million square kilometers.

It covers 40 percent of the surface area of South America, stretching across nine countries and territories: Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela. Around three million indigenous people—members of 400 tribes—live there, according to the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO). Around 60 of those tribes live in total isolation. The following is a look back over at how the novel coronavirus spread through the Amazon jungle, and how those communities are handling the crisis.

Isolated but not protected

In mid-March, panic struck Carauari, in western Brazil. Carauari is home to one of the most isolated communities in the world, and is only accessible by a week-long boat ride from Manaus, the nearest major city. At first, the virus was seen as a threat that was well removed from the multi-colored houses on stilts that overlook the Jurua

river, a tributary of the Amazon. But the announcement of the first case in Manaus, the regional capital of Amazonas state, quickly sowed panic in the community.

No one in Carauari had forgotten how diseases brought by European colonizers ripped through the native populations in the Americas, nearly eliminating them altogether due to their lack of immunity. "We're praying to God not to bring this epidemic here. We're doing everything we can—washing our hands often, like they tell us on TV," said Jose Barbosa das Gracas, 52. The first confirmed case amongst Brazil's indigenous population was confirmed in early April: a 20-year-old health care worker from the Kokama tribe, who lived near the Colombian border. She had worked with a doctor who also tested positive.

Calls for help

Sensing the mounting threat, indigenous leaders and celebrities sounded the alarm, warning that Amazonian indigenous communities could face annihilation without help. "There are no doctors in our communities. There is no protective gear to aid prevention," Jose Gregorio Diaz Mirabal, the elected leader of the collective of Amazon indigenous organizations, said in late April. For Yohana Pantevis, a 34-year-old inhabitant of Leticia, in Colombia's Amazonas state, "falling ill here is always scary, but now we're more afraid than ever." Brazilian-born photojournalist Sebastiao Salgado,

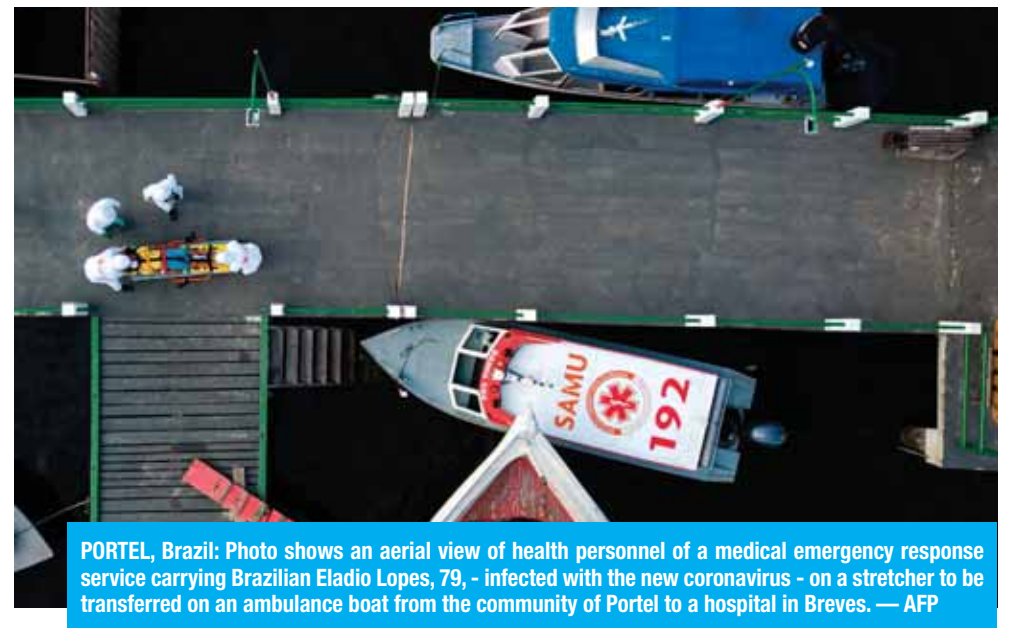
known for his work in the Amazon, warned of the "huge risk of a real catastrophe." "If the virus gets into the forest, we don't have a way to get help to them. The distances are so huge. The indigenous people will be abandoned," said the 76-year-old. "I call that genocide—the elimination of an ethnic group and its culture," he said, accusing the government of Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro of anti-indigenous policies. In early June, iconic indigenous leader Raoni Metuktire accused Bolsonaro of wanting "to take advantage of this disease." "He's saying, 'Indians have to die, we have to finish them off,'" he told AFP in an interview.—AFP

Due to sanitary measures prompted by the virus, the nuns cannot take in more children, or receive visitors from companies or groups that used to bring donations each Saturday. A sign at the door says clothes and toys are no longer accepted, although some benefactors continue to leave what food they can spare. "The situation worries us a lot because we have no economic security," said Mother Ines, 52, standing in a small room full of toys. Most of the children at the orphanage are girls. Some of those who have been there long enough to see their emotional wounds start to heal flash smiles, while nervous newer arrivals keep their heads down. Many have been through traumatic times. One girl's father murdered her mother and buried her in the yard.

TEXCOCO: At an orphanage in pandemic-stricken Mexico, the nuns water down milk and eke out food for the children—victims of violence, poverty, and now the economic fallout from the coronavirus. Even before donations began drying up because of the disease, it was a struggle for Mother Ines de Maria Piedras and her sisters to keep the shelter located in Texcoco, in central Mexico, running.

Now the Casa Hogar San Martin De Porres y Juan XXIII is facing a critical situation. Largely dependent on state resources that were already insufficient before the virus struck, the orphanage has lost several benefactors due to the pandemic. "Many of them were left without work, so they stopped their donations until further notice," Mother Ines told AFP. Since 1965 the shelter has welcomed children who have suffered from mistreatment, sexual abuse or the sudden disappearance of their parents.

Currently 65 children and teenagers live there.



PORTEL, Brazil: Photo shows an aerial view of health personnel of a medical emergency response service carrying Brazilian Eladio Lopes, 79, - infected with the new coronavirus - on a stretcher to be transferred on an ambulance boat from the community of Portel to a hospital in Breves. — AFP

known for his work in the Amazon, warned of the "huge risk of a real catastrophe."

"If the virus gets into the forest, we don't have a way to get help to them. The distances are so huge. The indigenous people will be abandoned," said the 76-year-old. "I call that genocide—the elimination of an ethnic group and its culture," he

Intensive farming heightens COVID risk, study says

PARIS: Intensive farming makes future pandemics such as COVID-19 more likely as wild animals carrying diseases known to infect humans are forced into increasingly close contact with us, research showed Wednesday. Writing in the journal *Nature*, a team of researchers from University College London warned that animal pathogens are increasingly likely to make the leap to humans as land use changes benefit animal hosts. The United Nations estimates that three quarters of land on Earth has been severely degraded by human activity since the start of the industrial era.

An insatiable surge in food consumption means that one third of all land and three quarters of all fresh water is given over to agriculture. Land used for farming is expanding every year, often to the detriment of natural havens such as forests, home to wild animals that carry numerous diseases from which humans can fall ill. The UCL team looked at more than 6,800 ecological communities from six continents

and found that animals known to carry pathogens - such as bats, rodents and birds - are more common in landscapes intensively used by humans. They said their findings show a clear need to change how we exploit land in order to reduce the risk of future pandemics. "The way humans change landscapes across the world, from natural forest to farmland, has consistent impacts on many wild animal species, causing some to decline while others persist or increase," said Rory Gibb, from UCL's Centre for Biodiversity and Environment Research. "Our findings show that the animals that remain in more human-dominated environments are those that are more likely to carry infectious diseases that can make people sick."

More than half of agricultural land increase is being carved out of Earth's forests, according to the UN's biodiversity panel. COVID-19, which has infected more than 18 million people and killed more than 700,000, is almost certain to have originated in animals before passing to and spreading among humans. The novel coronavirus is just one of several deadly viruses that have made the leap from animals, which carry thousands of types of microbes that may be harmful to humans. And as the disease reservoir gets squeezed ever tighter, the risk of leaks rises. Research co-author Kate Jones said the findings showed how governments should view agriculture and food supply as intrinsically linked to human health. —AFP