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Military forces and COVID-19 as smokescreens for Amazon destruction and violation of indigenous rights

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Abstract

The President of Brazil has adopted an anti-environmental stance since taking office in January 2019, weakening the rights of indigenous peoples and environmental legislation and militarizing the environmental and indigenous agencies. The president's stance on the COVID-19 pandemic gives priority to economic development rather than to saving lives. The administration's environment minister even suggested taking advantage of the media's attention being focussed on the pandemic as an 'opportunity' to weaken environmental legislation. Here we argue that both the pandemic and the militarization of Brazil's environmental protection have served as smokescreens to weaken environmental protections, and have also put Brazil's indigenous peoples at risk and violated their rights.

Zusammenfassung

Der brasilianische Präsident hat seit seinem Amtsantritt im Januar 2019 eine umweltfeindliche Haltung eingenommen, die die Rechte indigener Völker und die Umweltgesetzgebung schwächt und die Umwelt- und indigenen Behörden militarisiert. In seiner Position zur COVID-19-Pandemie räumt der Präsident der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung Vorrang vor der Rettung von Leben ein. Der Umweltminister der Regierung schlug sogar vor, die Aufmerksamkeit der Medien, die sich auf die Pandemie konzentriert, als eine „Gelegenheit“ zu nutzen, um die Umweltgesetzgebung zu schwächen. Hier argumentieren wir, dass sowohl die Pandemie als auch die Militarisierung des brasilianischen Umweltschutzes als Deckmantel gedient haben, um den Umweltschutz zu schwächen, und auch die indigenen Völker Brasiliens in Gefahr gebracht und ihre Rechte verletzt haben.

Keywords Amazonia, indigenous peoples, rainforest, tropical forest, Coronavirus, deforestation, environmental impact

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Brazil's current president has adopted policies and discourse that have damaged the environment and violated the rights of indigenous peoples (Ferrante and Fearnside 2019; 2020a). A pattern of scientific denialism includes not only climate change but also the severity of COVID-19, with President Bolsonaro defending the end of isolation in favor of the economy, thus putting the population of Brazil at risk (Ferrante and Fearnside 2020b; *The Lancet* 2020). On March 24th, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro recommended that quarantine in the country be stopped (Fernandes and Fabrini 2020), saying that the economic crisis could kill more than the COVID-19 pandemic itself (*G1* 2020a). The president's opinion has no basis in science and is nothing more than a treat for the stock market at the expense of the many deaths projected to occur in Brazil (Ferrante and Fearnside 2020b; *The Lancet* 2020) and that today is becoming visible (Albuquerque et al. 2020).

On the date of Bolsonaro's speech in defense of the economy on April 8th (Fernandes and Fabrini 2020), Brazil had recorded 553 deaths from COVID-19 (*WHO* 2020), and by October 24th, 156,903 deaths had already been officially recognized as being caused by COVID-19 (*Ministério da Saúde* 2020). However, even though Brazil occupies the second position in the world in number of deaths, these numbers are grossly underestimated (Albuquerque et al. 2020).

On the day following the president's pronouncement, Brazil's currency rose sharply (the reverse of what had been happening in the preceding months), and values on the Brazilian stock exchange increased by 7%. The president's discourse on COVID-19 has served as a smokescreen shielding Amazon destruction from attention while his policies further stimulate deforestation, illegal mining, land grabbing and invasion of indigenous lands.

At the January 2020 meeting in Davos business leaders made their concerns clear to the Brazilian economy minister about Brazil's environmental positions. Immediately after the minister's return to Brazil, President Bolsonaro created the Amazon Council to 'coordinate' all actions in the region, including combating deforestation and fires (Costa 2020). The council is composed of 19 military officers and excludes civil society, environmental agencies, indigenous organizations and research institutes and is chaired by the Vice President of Brazil, General Hamilton Mourão (Valente 2020).

At a ministerial meeting in April, the environment minister (Ricardo Salles) called on his fellow ministers to take advantage of the media's attention being focused on COVID-19 to "let the herd of cattle pass through" (*G1* 2020b, translated from Portuguese by the authors), the "cattle" in this expression being an allusion to measures to dismantle environmental regulations and legislation. On July 13th, two weeks after Brazil's space research institute (INPE) released deforestation data contradicting President Bolsonaro, the head of INPE's deforestation-monitoring program was dismissed (Kafruni 2020). Two weeks later General Mourão claimed that, comparing the deforestation rate in May 2019 to that in May 2020, "the decrease is practically total" (*TV Brasil* 2020, translated by the authors); however, INPE's data show an increase in deforestation in the first six months of 2020 as compared to 2019 (INPE 2020a). Military influence permeates the environmental agency, and military participation in repressing deforestation or fires has not stemmed the surge (Escobar 2020; Hashizume 2020). The military has avoided carrying out operations in deforestation hotspots (Alessi 2020), and environmental inspectors have reported that the military has intentionally hindered inspection actions (Prite 2020). Military personnel also distributed chloroquine to indigenous people (*Portal Roraima* 2020) despite research findings showing the drug's lack of effectiveness and risk of serious side effects (Beigel et al. 2020; Lowe 2020).

Staff in federal environmental agencies who have performed their functions correctly have been punished by the environment minister (Gonzales 2020a). In order to favor agribusiness, the current presidential administration has taken a series of measures weakening the country's legislation for environmental protection, for indigenous peoples and for combating 'slave' labor (Branford and Borges 2019; Ferrante and Fearnside 2019; Gonzales 2020b). In 2019, the first year of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's notoriously anti-environmental administration, the world was shocked by the explosion of Amazon deforestation and burning. Now, one year later, Brazil is experiencing another surge in deforestation and the highest rates of burning in the Amazon in the last 20 years (INPE 2020b). In addition, at least 23% of the entire Pantanal wetlands had been consumed by flames by late September (Paz 2020). Although the increase in fires in Brazil is undeniable, Environment Minister Salles even denied that the burning is occurring (Moraes 2020). Vice-President Mourão claimed that the data

on burning from Brazil's space research agency must have been leaked by some opponent of the presidential administration, but these data have always been public (*O Eco* 2020). President Bolsonaro's speech to the United Nations on September 22nd reinforced this denial (*Agência Brasil* 2020). This 15-minute speech contained at least 15 lies and misrepresentations, including blaming Indigenous peoples for the current Amazon fire crisis (*Ribeiro et al.* 2020). Instead of changing its discourse and policies that have brought on the environmental crisis, the Brazilian government is attempting to shove the problem under the rug.

The measures adopted to favor the economy have increased predatory pressures on the Amazon, relaxing controls on deforestation, mining, roads and hydroelectric dams, as well as opening the region for monocultures to produce biofuels (*Ferrante and Fearnside* 2019; 2020a,c,d). Fires and deforestation are used to remove forest to make room for monocultures and livestock, which the government encourages. The presidential administration is also pushing ahead with projects for Amazonian highways, mining and hydroelectric plants (*Fearnside* 2019; 2020a,b,c,d; *Ferrante and Fearnside* 2020d).

These activities are intrinsically linked to the burning in the Amazon and Pantanal, which means that countries that import the commodities produced by these activities are contributing to the massive loss of biodiversity and ecological services and to emissions of greenhouse gases (*Kehoe et al.* 2019). Although the impacts of Amazon forest destruction are global, Brazil stands to lose the most from this transformation. The water supply for São Paulo, the largest city in the Western Hemisphere, depends on water that is recycled through Amazonian trees and transported as vapor to southeastern Brazil by winds known as the 'flying rivers' (*Arraut et al.* 2012; *Fearnside* 2015; *Zemp et al.* 2014).

An example of projects that are being accelerated during the pandemic and that have violated the rights of indigenous peoples is the BR-319 Highway, impacting 18,000 people in 63 officially recognized indigenous lands (*Ferrante et al.* 2020a). The highway project is being forced through both the environmental-licensing process and the judicial system (*Ferrante and Fearnside* 2020d). The highway has stimulated the migration of loggers and other actors from the 'arc of deforestation', and these actors have opened illegal access roads in indigenous lands; the chief of the in-

vaded areas has lodged a judicial complaint against these invaders for disseminating the coronavirus (*Fearnside et al.* 2020). The spread of SARS-CoV-2 in indigenous communities by invaders is an especially serious threat because indigenous people are a COVID-19 risk group (*Ferrante and Fearnside* 2020b). The greater mortality of elderly people puts entire cultures at risk because tribal traditions are passed from the elders to the younger generations (*Ferrante et al.* 2020b). The impacts of COVID-19 and the recent spike of invasions come on top of a series of measures by the federal government weakening the protection of indigenous peoples (*Alessi* 2019; *Gonzales* 2020a; *Maisonnave* 2020; *Rocha* 2020).

The International Criminal Court in The Hague is currently evaluating whether the actions of Brazil's president in weakening the protection of Amazonia and its indigenous peoples during the pandemic should be considered crimes against humanity and genocide (*Bernard* 2020). Foreign investors must review the impact of their investments on Amazon deforestation.

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