

Indigenous communities 'robbed' as land grabbers lay waste to Brazilian rainforest

Terra Indígena Ituna/Itatá in northern Brazil is home to several groups of uncontacted peoples who are dependent on the surrounding forest for survival. But outsiders have been increasingly moving in and clearing land for agriculture and mining, reports ***Ana Ionova**.



Amazon clearing - under fire

All that is left of the lush forest that once covered this patch of land in the Terra Indígena Ituna/Itatá in northern Brazil are a few dried branches and the occasional tree stump. On one side, a massive excavator stands abandoned, gathering dust in the middle of the Brazilian Amazon. Further out, dense, untouched jungle stretches for miles.

The scene, captured by federal authorities in late August, is just one

glimpse of the surge in recent invasions of Ituna/Itatá, an indigenous territory spanning some 142,000 hectares (548 square miles) in the northern Brazilian state of Pará. The land is a vast expanse of dense, virgin forest, more than 900 kilometers (560 miles) from the state capital of Belém. By law, it should be home to indigenous people who live in voluntary isolation from the outside world – and no one else.

The presence of these uncontact-

ed peoples was first detected during the planning of the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam, a massive project that opened up the region around Rio Xingu to a flood of business and labor. Outsiders have been banned from Ituna/Itatá since 2011, with the aim of protecting these isolated tribes, which are particularly vulnerable to common disease brought in from elsewhere.

Yet this hasn't stopped invaders from razing increasingly large swaths of

forest within Ituna/Itatá, with the area last year earning the somber title of the most deforested indigenous territory in Brazil, according to Rede Xingu+, a network of environmental and indigenous groups working in the Xingu Basin. And more recently, it seems the deforestation may be ramping up further: Satellite data from the University of Maryland recorded around 57,000 tree cover loss alerts between Jan. 1 and Oct. 21, with nearly 70 percent occurring since the beginning of August. Brazilian authorities estimate that about 10 percent of the territory has been illegally invaded and destroyed this year alone.

“There’s a big concern because the uncontacted tribes living in that area may not be able to defend themselves,” Mikaela Weisse, manager of World Resources Institute’s forest monitoring platform Global Forest Watch, told Mongabay in an interview.

Invaders

The path into the territory was first opened up by illegal timber exploitation going back at least to 2016, says one local advocacy source who asked to remain anonymous due to security concerns. Soon, ranchers, miners and land-grabbers also began invading the region.

Recently, there have been signs that some of these invaders may be there to stay. Many are registering the land they have illegally cleared within Ituna/Itatá and some have been building settlements in the middle of the jungle. Local sources report movement of pickup trucks deep into the forest, which are believed to be helping clear stretches of land to make way for cattle pastures.

“It’s a type of speculation,” the advocacy source said. “They are going there as if the land will not be indigenous anymore in the future. And they are rushing to grab it for themselves, to secure it now.”

While assaults on indigenous territories in Brazil have been happening for decades, activists say the sharp rise in deforestation and land-grabbing in Ituna/Itatá this year has been closely linked to the country’s controversial new president Jair Bolsonaro.

The far-right leader, who was sworn



Brazilian President Bolsonaro - complicit?

into office earlier this year, has stated that indigenous people should be integrated into society, while railing against land protections as an “obstacle” to mining and development. Repeatedly, he has vowed not to demarcate a centimeter of additional land for indigenous people.

“They don’t speak our language, but they have somehow managed to get 14% of our national territory,” Bolsonaro said in August, while suggesting demarcation of indigenous land is the result of an international conspiracy.

Bolsonaro has also launched an open attack on Funai, the government agency tasked with protecting indigenous interests in Brazil. The president signed a decree curbing Funai’s powers earlier this year, dealing a further blow to an agency already weakened by the previous government’s move to slash its funding in half. Recently, Bolsonaro also went on to appoint a former police chief with strong ruralist links as head of the organization.

The enforcement of environmental law has also been hard-hit. Earlier this year, Bolsonaro stripped Ibama of some of its powers, handing over final say on environmental sanctions to a newly established court. Environmental fines have also plummeted since the president assumed office in January.

Critics say all of this has emboldened invaders to illegally grab more land in indigenous territories – in Ituna/Itatá and elsewhere across Brazil – without

fear of repercussions. Meanwhile, dwindling resources have meant many Funai and Ibama posts in more remote parts of Brazil have shut down in recent years, leaving land-grabbers free to invade indigenous territories.

“There’s a general air of impunity, which has allowed this situation to get so out of control,” said Jonathan Mazower, spokesperson for Survival International, a nonprofit organization that campaigns for the rights of indigenous people. “The system of protection for indigenous territories is unquestionably not working at all.”

The impact has been particularly acute in territories like Ituna/Itatá, which remains under fragile government protection. While the land is under some federal preservation, it is still not fully demarcated as an indigenous territory. In January, Funai renewed its restricted status for another three years – but activists in the region say land-grabbers are betting this may not be the case for long.

“Landgrabbers that support Bolsonaro believe that those lands will not be demarcated,” said Danicley Aguiar, a senior campaigner with Greenpeace Brazil, who is based in Belém and works in the region. “He has promised that they won’t be demarcated. And this creates, in these land-grabbers, an expectation that these lands are not valid.”

Despite the fact that this territory is federally owned and set aside for indigenous peoples, as much as 87% has been

claimed illegally by invaders through the national system of rural land registration, known as Sistema de Cadastro Ambiental Rural (CAR), according to Rede Xingu+. Some plots have even been registered several times by different invaders declaring themselves as the rightful owners, highlighting the mad scramble to lay claim to this territory.

The impact on the people who call this region home, meanwhile, has been profound. Fearing for their lives, uncontacted indigenous people are fleeing from Ituna/Itatá and deeper into the forest, human rights advocates say. As larger stretches of the territory are cleared, some also worry indigenous groups will not be able to continue their nomadic lifestyles.

“Isolated peoples are probably the most vulnerable people we see in the Brazilian Amazon today,” said Christian Poirier, program director at Amazon Watch, a nonprofit working to protect the rainforest and the rights of indigenous peoples in the Amazon Basin. “Where you have increasing pressure on the land, imagine how that affects this particular community. It’s devastating for them.”

This could have the precise impact that land-grabbers are after: as deforestation drives uncontacted communities out of the territory, the chances that Ituna/Itatá will hang onto its protected status are diminishing. This is because, in order to renew the area’s status every few years, Funai must find signs of uncontacted indigenous people still living there.

“These indigenous territories are in the process of being demarcated,” said Aguiar of Greenpeace. “The more the forest is robbed, the higher the chance that these isolated people will flee. And the forest will be left for the ranchers and the land-grabbers.”

The encroachment into Ituna/Itatá is also placing additional pressure on smaller indigenous territories in the surrounding area, local advocates say. As the surrounding forest shrinks and the jungle is chopped up into smaller pieces, neighboring territories like Paquitamba and Arara da Volta Grande do Xingu are becoming increasingly isolated. This means it’s becoming ever more difficult for the forest-dependent indigenous people who

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live there to survive off the remaining slices of land.

Constant battle

The scene resembled an action film: heavily armed federal agents moved deep into the Brazilian jungle, exchanging fire with land-grabbers. In a dramatic moment during their operation, they discovered and shut down an illegal airstrip that was likely being used to bring chainsaws, fuel and workers to the middle of the jungle.

It was late August and the entourage – which included agents from Brazil’s National Public Security Force and the country’s environmental agency, Ibama – was there to crack down on the rampant deforestation swallowing up large swaths of the Ituna/Itatá indigenous territory, which had been intensifying since the beginning of the month.

The operation, which drew ample attention and media coverage, was not the Brazilian state’s first attempt to curb deforestation in Ituna/Itatá. While clearing within the territory has surged to new and dramatic levels this year, it is really over the course of 2018 that invaders have grown ever bolder in their take-over of this land, after seeing that authorities can do little to stop them.

Ibama has responded to the assault on Ituna/Itatá with at least five operations in the area in 2018 and 2019, advocacy sources estimate. Yet the long-term impact appears to be limited: just weeks after the latest crackdown, activists and local sources report that land-grabbers

have gone back to clearing the forest.

The issue lies with a toxic cocktail of factors, which simultaneously enable deforestation and ensure the culprits rarely face punishment. For one, the territory – and the broader region – lies in the heart of the so-called deforestation arc, a crescent-shaped area running along the southern and eastern edges of the Amazon where agricultural development is displacing forest at particularly fast clips. As more and more of the surrounding area has been deforested over the last few decades, the pressure has increased on areas like Ituna/Itatá. “The deforestation and the pressure is coming from the development border,” the local advocacy source said. “And the indigenous protected areas are the only ones where forest remains.”

The remote location of Ituna/Itatá has also helped shield invaders. The territory is only accessible either by helicopter or by ferry from the city of Altamira, followed by about a five-hour drive along a rough road through dense jungle. The isolated location of the region makes it that much easier for the razing of forest to go unnoticed.

Enforcing environmental law across Ituna/Itatá also remains difficult. Ibama, faced with an intensifying shortage of resources, has no permanent post in the region and can only act in a knee-jerk response to a fraction of the rampant clearing taking place in Ituna/Itatá. Even when authorities have held invaders accountable, it’s mostly been a Band-aid effort targeting a few individual invaders rather than the large enterprises behind the deforestation, Aguiar says.

In a recent report, Human Rights Watch found that illegal deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon is largely driven by criminal networks who coordinate large-scale illegal logging operations, while deploying armed men to intimidate forest defenders and indigenous people.

“You can destroy an airstrip or close a ranch,” he said. “But when you return to the city or to Brasilia, the land-grabber will just restart everything. You need to dig deeper to really stop this.”

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