

‘They Will Die’: Fears for the Last Piripkura as Amazon Invasion Ramps Up

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Roads, trucks, fences, cow barns, cattle herds, and vast pasturelands. Overflight images from advocacy groups have revealed all this inside what’s supposed to be the protected territory of the Piripkura people, [one of the world’s most vulnerable uncontacted Indigenous peoples](#), in the Brazilian Amazon. The images, captured in October, show the scale of the threats looming over the Piripkura Indigenous Territory, and the risks to the last two known Piripkura individuals living there, Pakyê and Tamandua.

“The movement of trucks, the occupation of houses, the good condition of the pasture and the presence of cattle herds during the flyover show that the ranches installed in the Indigenous territory are not at a standstill, but rather they are exploiting the natural resources and carrying out commercial activities,” says a [dossier](#) released at the end of November, at the same time the photos went public. The dossier is signed by the Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB) and the Observatory for the Human Rights of Isolated and Recently Contacted Indigenous Peoples (OPI), which lead the [campaign “Uncontacted or Destroyed.”](#)

Located in the northwest of Mato Grosso state, the Piripkura territory spans 243,000 hectares (600,500 acres) and is the most deforested of all the reserves occupied by isolated or recently contacted Indigenous people in Brazil in recent years, according to Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), a nonprofit that advocates for the rights of Indigenous and traditional peoples. From August 2020 to July 2021, more than 2,150 hectares (5,310 acres) of forest were cleared inside the territory, a nearly hundredfold increase from the same period a year earlier.



The Piripkura Indigenous Territory is the most deforested of the reserves occupied by isolated and recently contacted Indigenous people in Brazil. Most of this destruction occurred during the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro, who took office at the start of 2019. From August 2020 to July 2021, more than 2,150 hectares (5,310 acres) of forest were cleared inside the territory, a nearly hundredfold increase from the same period a year earlier. Image courtesy of Rogério Assis/Instituto Socioambiental (ISA).

Indigenous rights activists say driving this surge is the anticipation among would-be invaders that a restriction ordinance banning outsiders won't be renewed as it has every two years since 2008. Under President Jair Bolsonaro, [who promised not to demarcate any Indigenous reserves](#), the odds of the restriction being allowed to lapse are high, prompting a rush of land grabbers into the Piripkura territory, activists say.

Following pressure from civil society and NGOs, the restriction ordinance was renewed this past September, but only for six months. But as the images captured in the overflight show, it hasn't dissuaded invaders.

"These people keep on deforesting, planting pasture, and raising cattle while waiting for a decision that will end with the Indigenous reserve and regularize the invasions," Antonio Oviedo told Mongabay in a phone interview. Oviedo coordinates ISA's protected areas monitoring program; the nonprofit also supports the "Uncontacted or Destroyed" campaign.



In September 2020, the federal environmental protection agency, IBAMA, counted 3,185 head of cattle on four ranches inside the Piripkura territory. According to Operation Native Amazon (OPAN), there are 15 ranches operating inside the territory, with 54% of its land registered as private properties in state and federal electronic land registries. Image courtesy of Rogério Assis/Instituto Socioambiental (ISA).

In September 2020, the federal environmental protection agency, IBAMA, reported the presence of 3,185 head of cattle on four ranches inside the Piripkura territory. The information is cited in [a lawsuit filed by federal prosecutors](#) in May, requesting the expulsion of at least 10 invaders; the case remains open. IBAMA did not respond to Mongabay's request for information about the presence of ranchers inside the territory.

A report from Operation Native Amazon (OPAN) published in April identified a total of 131,870 hectares (325,857 acres) [registered as private properties in federal electronic land registries](#), which represents 54% of the territory's total area. Through fieldwork, OPAN has also identified 15 ranches operating inside the Piripkura territory.

Besides ranchers and land grabbers, miners have shown increased interest in the prospect of the Piripkura Indigenous Territory losing its protection. In September, Brazilian website Infoamazônia showed that [a newly created mining cooperative had applied for](#) the right to mine an area twice the size of the territory, on the border with the Piripkura land.

"They will die"

"They will die," Rita Piripkura said when she saw the satellite images of deforestation advancing inside her homeland, according to Leonardo Lenin, an Indigenous rights activist with OPI. Lenin, who showed the images to Rita, told Mongabay that she quickly realized the invaders were approaching the *igarapés* (streams) where her brother and nephew, [Pakyû and Tamandua](#), respectively, have been hiding recently. Lenin said Rita was the first Piripkura contacted by non-Indigenous people, back in the 1980s. Today, she lives in the

Karipuna reserve, in northern Rondônia state, but often goes back to visit her homeland in Mato Grosso, he added.

“Rita is very worried. She is watching her territory being destroyed and the invaders getting closer and closer to her family members,” Lenin said in a phone call. “At the same time, she doesn’t feel safe on the Karipuna reserve, [which is also suffering from invasions](#).”



Rita Piripkura, one of only three known Piripkura individuals, says she’s worried because the invaders are closing in on the areas occupied by her relatives. The first Piripkura contacted by non-Indigenous people, she now lives in the Karipuna reserve, in Rondônia state. The Piripkura people have survived at least two massacres since the 1980s. Image courtesy of Bruno Jorge.

Lenin was from 2007 to 2011 the coordinator of the Madeirinha-Juruena ethnoenvironmental protection front, an outpost of Funai, the federal agency for Indigenous affairs, responsible for protecting the Piripkura. Pakyî, Tamandua and Rita are the only known Piripkura alive, but they mention the existence of at least 13 other people living in the area, according to Lenin.

The Piripkura [have reportedly suffered at least two massacres](#) since they were first contacted, as the result of loggers and ranchers encroaching into their territory. That’s probably why Pakyî and Tamandua have never wanted to live in non-Indigenous society, Lenin said. “They don’t want to leave their land and they don’t want to establish a relationship with the outside world.” Proof of this, he added, is that they seldom look for Funai staff from the protection front; one of the rare occasions that they did, when the fire of their torch went out, was recorded in the [award-winning documentary Piripkura](#).

To evade the invaders on their land, Pakyî and Tamandua have had to change their way of life, activists say. They gave up agriculture, for example, for hunting and gathering, to increase their mobility through the territory. “Isolation for them is a survival strategy, just like escaping,” said Sarah Shenker from Survival International, a global nonprofit movement for the rights of Indigenous peoples, which also backs the “Uncontacted or Destroyed” campaign. “I suppose they are running away right now, because they know that otherwise

they will be killed,” Shenker told Mongabay in a phone call.

Demarcation on demand for land grabbers

The restriction ordinance renewed by Bolsonaro should work as an emergency protection tool until the demarcation of the Piripkura territory is concluded — a process that has been dragging on since the 1980s, when the Piripkura were first contacted.

In June, Funai created a work group to conduct the demarcation studies. In early November, however, a federal court in Mato Grosso [ordered the replacement of three members of the group, arguing](#) they were not qualified for the job and [had relations with agribusiness interest groups](#). According to court documents, one of them had worked for Mato Grosso’s Agriculture and Livestock Federation and two of them had participated in the formulation of [a normative ruling that facilitates land grabbing](#) inside non-demarcated Indigenous lands, like the Piripkura territory.



An overflight promoted by Indigenous advocacy groups in October revealed structures put in place by outsiders invading the Piripkura Indigenous Territory in the Amazonian state of Mato Grosso. Trucks, cow barns and electricity lines show that cattle ranching is in full swing. Image courtesy of Rogério Assis/Instituto Socioambiental (ISA).

Since Bolsonaro came into power at the start of 2019, Funai has repeatedly gone against Brazil’s country’s official policy of not seeking to engage with isolated and recently contacted groups. In July 2020, the government passed a federal law allowing religious missionaries to remain inside Indigenous lands, but this was [annulled by Brazil’s highest court](#) in October. Bolsonaro, who is [hugely popular](#) with Brazil’s evangelicals, had also appointed [Ricardo Lopes Dias](#), a former missionary from the New Tribes Mission to head the Funai department responsible for protecting isolated and recently contacted communities. The mission, which has since changed its name to Ethnos360, is a fundamentalist Christian organization notorious for past attempts to contact and convert isolated tribes in the Amazon. Lopes left his Funai post in November 2020.

In a statement, Funai said the court decision that dissolved the group in charge of demarcations made it impossible to start the demarcation process of the Piripkura territory. Funai also claimed that it will present a definitive solution for the issue, but without providing any details.

Lenin said he fears the Bolsonaro administration will reduce the Piripkura territory once the protective ordinance expires, at the end of March, to legitimize the invaders' presence there. "We fear that Funai will reduce the Indigenous territory to leave out the farms," he said, "which then can be legalized."

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Featured image: Pakyî and Tamandua are the only two Piripkura known to live in the Piripkura territory, but they and Rita Piripkura, who lives in the Kariyuna reserve, have reportedly alluded to at least 13 other Piripkura living inside their ancestral land. To escape the invaders, they have had to change their way of life, abandoning agriculture in favor of hunting and gathering. Image courtesy of Survival International.

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