

April 22, 2020

**Statement of Concern Regarding Land Grabs and the Spread of Covid-19
in Brazilian Indigenous Areas**

The Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America, an international scholarly organization composed of professors, students, and practitioners, is united in voicing our concerns with the revelation that illegal land speculation in the Brazilian Amazon may be accelerating the spread of the coronavirus global pandemic among indigenous peoples within their own demarcated territories.

Recently released audio and video clips, reported by the Brazilian network *Globo* on Sunday, April 19, 2020, reveal a widespread scheme that encourages outsiders to enter and build houses and farms on indigenous lands in the southern part of the Brazilian state of Pará. The scheme in itself is illegal, as Brazilian law does not allow indigenous territories to be subdivided or privatized; the migrating colonists who think they are buying a plot of land are actually victims of a massive swindle. Although this has occurred in the region since the rubber cycle and the construction of highways, land grabs (“*grilagem*” in Portuguese) have accelerated in recent times with the impacts of the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant and of the public pronouncements of President Jair Bolsonaro which disrespect indigenous people’s constitutional right to have their lands recognized. Our concern at this moment is intensified because the incursion of land grabbing within indigenous lands is a deadly threat to the health and well-being of more than 8,500 indigenous Brazilians living in 13 demarcated territories in the region affected by these invasions. Recent reports from the Indigenous Health Secretariat (SESAI) of the Ministry of Health show an alarming jump of coronavirus cases among indigenous Brazilians in the country’s northern states, and just last week a Yanomami youth succumbed to the virus, which he contracted via contact with trespassers digging for gold on his land. Compounding matters, SESAI has indicated that it is responsible only for what it terms “village Indians,” an anachronistic phrase that excludes indigenous peoples living in cities and in voluntary isolation. In addition, the underreporting of the entire Brazilian population makes it even more difficult to measure the incidence of COVID-19 among indigenous people. The current crisis recalls the devastating smallpox and measles epidemics of the 19th and 20th centuries, which in some native communities resulted in staggeringly high death rates of near 90%.

Land-grabbing schemes along expanding agricultural frontiers are doubly dangerous: they seek to undercut indigenous peoples’ constitutionally-guaranteed territorial rights, but they also introduce diseases like COVID-19. Before this twin tragedy spirals out of control, we call on the Brazilian Federal Public Ministry, the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), IBAMA, and the Federal Police to investigate the land-grabbing schemes centered in the town of São Felix do Xingu, including the politically well-connected persons who seem to be benefitting from them. Additionally, we encourage all agencies of the Brazilian government charged with the affairs of health, the environment, and indigenous peoples to redouble their efforts to support the original inhabitants of the Americas during this time of existential threat. Finally, we praise the work of indigenous peoples themselves, who in their homes and in their communities are adhering to social distancing guidelines and other efforts to avoid contagion. We remain among their allies in this endeavor.



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