

Brazil

## Brazil's rainforest warriors ready to battle Bolsonaro

Indigenous people fear new president plans to encroach on their land

Andres Schipani in A'Ukre APRIL 18, 2019

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The Kayapó war cry resounded deep in the Amazon, the world's largest rainforest. Four dozen warriors, their headdresses made of yellow and red macaw feathers, stood in the village clearing, carrying shot guns and war clubs. Warrior women, the crowns of their heads shaven, sang high-pitched war cries and waved machetes in the air.

Kruwyt, the elderly male chief in the A'Ukre village, then led them in the *pry'ongrere* — a battle dance for “chasing after the enemy”. Their declared enemy is none other than Brazil's new president, [Jair Bolsonaro](#). The rightwing former captain, who took office in January, has slammed what he sees as the excessive legal protection afforded to Brazil's 305 ethnic groups and the “[enormity](#)” of their constitutionally-mandated land reserves.

“We are ready to go to war against any mis-step from President Bolsonaro,” Kruwyt told the group, their bodies patterned with black fruit dye, a sign of war. “He wants to reduce our land, he wants to end our traditions, and we are warriors defending our rainforest, our river, our culture,” he said.



Rainforest under threat: Activists say the presence of indigenous people helps guard against deforestation



Fearful about the future: The Kayapó men in A'Ukre village are anxious about Mr Bolsonaro's development plans

The 3.2m hectares of Kayapó land in the Xingú river basin, in the heart of Brazil, form part of one of the largest mosaics of contiguous indigenous lands in the country. Over the past several hundred years, the Kayapó have fought Portuguese colonisers, their tribal neighbours as well as Brazilian loggers and gold diggers. Now they are standing up to a government that is keen to open indigenous lands to commercial activity.

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The struggle of indigenous peoples to maintain their way of life, famously documented by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, is not new. But now Mr Bolsonaro has made access to this land a central part of his development policy, triggering an outcry at home and abroad. This week, the [American Museum of Natural History](#) scrapped an event to honour the president, citing concern about the Amazon rainforest.

In recent weeks, Mr Bolsonaro has slammed what he called “an industry of demarcation of indigenous lands” which “makes any development project in the Amazon unviable”. The president, who prides himself on his relationship with US leader Donald Trump, added he would like to explore the rainforest for riches “in partnership” with the US. Shortly after taking office, he stripped Brazil’s indigenous agency of its authority in demarcating indigenous lands, [transferring it](#) to the agriculture ministry, which critics say is dominated by agribusiness interests.

Federal prosecutors warn that the measure [is illegal](#), as the Brazilian constitution [guarantees](#) ethnic groups’ rights to their ancestral lands. “Today, we are seeing the biggest attack on our rights in Brazilian history,” said Joênia Wapichana, a lawyer and indigenous lawmaker. “To subvert indigenous policy to agricultural interests is absurd,” she said. Mr Bolsonaro’s critics accuse him of pandering to the conservative farming constituency that [brought him to power](#). Brazil is one of the world’s largest soya producers and environmentalists see the crop as a driver of deforestation.



## Rainforest under threat as Bolsonaro seeks access to indigenous areas



The heart of the matter, indigenous chiefs, anthropologists, and environmentalists say, is access to land. Indeed, 12.5 per cent of Brazil's vast territory — an area the size of Venezuela — is home to more than half a million indigenous people, mainly in the Amazon rainforest, according to the national statistics institute (IBGE). Overall, indigenous people make up less than 1 per cent of Brazil's 210m population. "This is our land, we were here before the *kubên*," said Pat-i, A'Ukre's young chief-in-waiting, referring to white people. "If we let them in they will destroy the rainforest and everything in it under the excuse we need 'their' development," he added.

Such development has not helped other Kayapó villages, he said, referring to nearby settlements that have fallen into the hands of illegal gold miners and been [wrecked by deforestation](#), drinking, and prostitution. There are frequent conflicts with miners, loggers and ranchers, said the Indigenous Missionary Council, an advocacy group.

Opening indigenous lands for development will ease such tensions by improving living standards, the government believes. "Are the Indians of Brazil all fine? They live in a poverty that is indigent. A country like ours, where the Indians have some 13 per cent of the national territory, and leave



them in the poverty that they live? There's something wrong," agriculture minister [Tereza Cristina Corrêa](#) said.



Life in the Amazon: One of the villagers bathes after a ceremony in A'Ukre. While villagers say they would like access to healthcare, many say they have everything they need



Making a living: A Kayapó warrior cuts leaves for a tribal meeting. Villagers hunt wild boars for food and harvest Brazil nuts for sale

The roughly 350 people in A'Ukre hunt wild boars for food and harvest Brazil nuts for sale. They have electricity from generators and clean water from a well. While there is a school in the village,



literacy rates are lower in indigenous communities than in other parts of Brazil, IGBE said, and child mortality rates are higher, a 2017 study shows. The Kayapó would like access to better healthcare, but otherwise, said Pat-i “I don't think we are poor. In the cities, the white man lives with money. Here we don't, we farm, we hunt, we fish, we dance. With all of that, we are rich.” Nearby, children swim in the river draped in yellow butterflies.

“This is their land, they owe nothing to anybody,” added Glenn Shepard, an anthropologist and ethnobotanist with the Museum Emílio Goeldi in Belém, who studies the Kayapó. Crucially, he said, “without them holding the fort, deforestation would advance rapidly”.

Indigenous lands act as “gigantic barriers to the encroachment of deforestation,” said IPAM, a research institute. Environmentalists warn that any attempt by the government to reduce the size of conservation reserves, ease environmental licensing and weaken indigenous rights, would pose further threats to the Amazon. Already in the first two months of 2019, 8,500 hectares of rainforest was cut down in the Xingu river basin. This represents a 54 per cent spike from the same period last year, said Instituto Socioambiental, an advocacy and research group, amid pressure from farmers and land grabbers.



Next generation: Children watch videos on a smartphone in A'Ukre village. Villagers rely on a generator for electricity



Defiant: The female tribal chief Ngreikamôrô has vowed to defend the rainforest

For the Kayapó, the fate of the rainforest is inextricably linked with their own survival. “The jungle is the source of life,” said Panhba, a young female warrior. “If they cut down the trees now, there won’t be air or nuts or fruits or animals left for my children and grandchildren.”

Amid the cries of howler monkeys in the forest canopy, Ngreikamôrô, the A’Ukre’s female chief, put it more forcefully. If the president opens up indigenous lands, and does not stop “speaking ill” of indigenous people, she said she will go to Brasília to meet him and there she will put her machete flat against his cheek. “I will do that to defend our river, to defend our rainforest,” she said. Then “I will cut his mouth off”.

*Photographs by Dado Galdieri for the FT*

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