

Brazil indigenous protest new government moves on their lands

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Brazil's far-right government is drawing protests from indigenous groups with two new moves involving their lands.

In this Jan. 29, 2019 file photo, Hayo, chief of the Pataxo Ha-ha-hae indigenous community, walks toward the Paraopeba River days after the collapse of a mining company dam, near his village in Brumadinho, Brazil. Brazil said Wednesday it has picked a former evangelical missionary to head a body assigned to protect indigenous tribes, raising concerns among human rights activists about the tribes' health and cultural identity. (AP Photo/Leo Correa, File)

Sao Paulo (Brazil): Brazil's far-right government drew protests from indigenous groups Wednesday, first by naming a former evangelical missionary to head a department responsible for protecting uncontacted and recently contacted tribes and then proposing legislation that would allow mining in indigenous lands.

The Justice Ministry announced in the morning that former missionary Ricardo Lopes Dias is the new coordinator-general of the government unit, which is part of the indigenous affairs agency known as Funai. That raised fears among activists about a possible threat to tribes' health and culture.

In the evening, President Jair Bolsonaro sent to Congress a bill that aims to regulate mining and energy generation on indigenous land. If approved, the legislation would open the way for agriculture and tourism, too. Brazil's administration initially did not reveal details of the bill.

The post announced at Funai was the first to cause an uproar.

In recent interviews with Brazilian media, Dias said he would not seek to evangelize indigenous groups. He told the newspaper O Globo before his nomination was made official that his actions would be purely technical, defended his knowledge of indigenous groups and insisted there is prejudice against him because of his faith.

Activists say that hasn't allayed their concerns, given Dias work in the Amazon in 1997-2007 as a member of the New Tribes nonprofit group. Currently called Ethnos360, the Florida-based group sends missionaries from local churches around the world, many to indigenous territory.

Brazil officially counts 28 groups of isolated indigenous peoples in the Amazon. Bolsonaro has said that indigenous groups should be integrated into Brazilian society and that their protected lands can pose a threat to development and national sovereignty.

A former Funai president, Marcio Santilli, told The Associated Press that the appointment of Dias was a matter of global concern.

“The risks of contact are of contamination by disease, as often happened in the past,” Santilli said. “And in the case of evangelism, there is the risk of attacking their ethnic identity.”

Leaders of the Matsigenka group, who live near the Brazilian border with Peru, said in an open letter that they oppose Dias' nomination. They said that in the early 2000s, he “manipulated part of the Matsigenka population to found a new village where an evangelical church would be built.”

“Mr. Ricardo never had the authorization to enter our village,” the leaders said. “Once again he tries to enter our territory. We don’t want new abuse.”

Funai did not respond to a request for comment about the letter.

Uira Garcia, a Sao Paulo University professor and an anthropologist who works with isolated indigenous groups in Maranhao state, said many missionaries already visit indigenous lands as teachers and doctors but never before has an evangelical been so high up at Funai.

He said widespread conversion to Christianity might pose a risk to Brazil’s environment.

“Every indigenous group sees a connection between the forest and their spiritual world. That’s why the Amazon is somewhat preserved. A change in religion could mean many things, including a condemnation of the preservation of the environment because it goes against a theology of prosperity, for example,” Garcia said in a phone interview.

Before the announcement, Brazil’s public defender’s office said it had asked Funai to detail protection policies for indigenous groups. It said it hoped any policy change would not “aggravate the vulnerabilities already faced” by isolated tribes.

As for the legislation on economic development in indigenous territories, it was far from clear if it could get through Congress. Lower House Speaker Rodrigo Maia and Senate President Davi Alcolumbre have already said they would not put to vote a bill that could affect the forest and its peoples. Bolsonaro is far from having a majority of supportive lawmakers.

The president’s chief of staff, Ányx Lorenzoni, compared the authorization to explore indigenous lands to a Brazilian law that ended slavery in 1888.

“It is not enough for the land to be rich if the people living in it are poor. Brazilian tribes will have the right to choose, like any citizen, how its wealth will be managed,” Lorenzoni said at a ceremony in Brasilia to celebrate Bolsonaro’s 400th day in office.

Observatorio do Clima, a network of 43 environmental groups in Brazil, said the passage of the bill would lead to “an increase in deforestation, invasions of indigenous lands, and violence against native peoples.”

It said that would hurt Brazil’s ability to attract foreign investment. “Responsible investors, concerned with the climate crisis, will hardly take deforestation and indigenous blood into their portfolios,” the network said.

- AP