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## Brazil's Congress fast-tracks plans to mine Indigenous land for potassium, blaming Russia sanctions

'These conditions are going to kill us': Indigenous Amazon communities brace for mining campaign

BY JILL LANGLOIS (HTTPS://WWW.CODASTORY.COM/AUTHOR/JILL-LANGLOIS/)

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We'e'ena Tikuna grew up hearing her grandfather's stories of slavery.

When he was young, the substance of choice to extract from his people's piece of the rainforest was latex. The men who invaded the land called it "white gold."

Like many Indigenous people living in the Brazilian Amazon from the late 1800s up until the first half of the 20th century, O'i Tikuna was forced to help them tap Para rubber trees, letting the sticky, milky liquid run into small metal buckets and then to be exported and sold. A commodity in high demand ever since the Industrial Revolution, its popularity resurged during WWII.

At first, O'i and others from the Tikuna Umariagu territory were promised payment and gifts for their labor. But these things never came.

"We used to be easily fooled," says We'e'ena. "We didn't know how to speak the white man's language. We had to learn so we could speak to them as equals."

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Today, young Tikuna people like We'e'ena are working to make sure the right information reaches those who never left their territory. Now in her early thirties, We'e'ena is bilingual. She lives and works in the city of Alter do Chão, and runs a popular [YouTube channel](https://www.youtube.com/c/WeeenaTikuna/featured) (<https://www.youtube.com/c/WeeenaTikuna/featured>) where she discusses Indigenous culture and rights issues. She is her grandfather's first point of contact outside the Tikuna community and a trusted source of information, especially when it comes to decisions being made by the federal government about how to manage and protect Indigenous land.

President Jair Bolsonaro's latest bid to make mining legal on Indigenous territories has We'e'ena, O'i and the rest of the Tikuna community worried. Long known for spouting anti-Indigenous rhetoric and attempting to diminish Indigenous rights, the far-right politician has found a new, far-fetched excuse to allow mining on Indigenous land: The war in Ukraine.

As the world's largest exporter of coffee and soy, Brazil needs fertilizer, and a lot of it. Its largest international supplier of fertilizer is Russia. But economic sanctions imposed by the West since Russia's invasion of Ukraine have caused all exports of the product to grind to a halt. This has left Brazil on edge about a possible shortage.

For Bolsonaro, Brazil's dependence on Russia for potassium, one of the primary nutrients of NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium) commercial fertilizers used in the country, is unacceptable. Opening up federally recognized and protected Indigenous land to mining, he says, would solve the problem. It's an argument he's been making since 2016 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0peDFZ4-n4>), when he was still a member of Congress. During a plenary session that year, where he spoke about the need to use Brazil's own potassium reserves for fertilizer production, he cited Indigenous reserves, among other things, as getting in the way.

As president, his proposed solution is to pass bill 191/2020, which would allow mining on that Indigenous land to happen. And he's using the war in Ukraine as a political tool to drive public fear of a national food shortage, in hopes of drumming up popular support.

"POTASSIUM is our food security," [he tweeted](https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1498963795309469696) (<https://twitter.com/jairbolsonaro/status/1498963795309469696>) on March 2, referring to one of the primary nutrients of commercial fertilizers used in the country.

"With the Russia/Ukraine war, we now run the risk of a potassium shortage or an increase in its price. Our food security and agribusiness (Economy demand of the Executive and Legislative branches, <https://www.codastory.com/>) [Donate \(https://checkout.fundjournalism.org/membership?org=codastory&campaign=7014W000010EJ4QAE\)](https://www.codastory.com/) measures that allow us not to be externally dependent on something that we have in abundance."

Bolsonaro insists that the potassium necessary for Brazil to produce its own fertilizers is located on Indigenous land.

The problem with that argument is that it's not true.



According to researchers ([https://twitter.com/RajaoPhD/status/1500634208645091331?s=20&t=dcVwFiBaQM65xRZpS7H\\_rQ](https://twitter.com/RajaoPhD/status/1500634208645091331?s=20&t=dcVwFiBaQM65xRZpS7H_rQ)) from the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), two-thirds of Brazil's potassium reserves are located outside the Amazon, in the states of São Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Sergipe. Inside the rainforest, none are located on Indigenous lands that are officially recognized and protected by the federal government. Just 11% of the country's potassium reserves are on Indigenous territories that still haven't completed the lengthy and bureaucratic process of becoming officially recognized as Indigenous lands and protected accordingly.

"Greater independence in the production of fertilizers, including potassium, requires long-term investments in science and technology," says Raoni Rajão, a professor of production engineering and coordinator of the Environmental Services Management Laboratory at UFMG who researches supply chain production in the Amazon.

"Allowing mining on Indigenous lands without discussing it with society will only create more problems without solving the fertilizer crisis."

Despite being false, the argument has managed to speed up the possible passage of the mining bill. Brazil's lower house of Congress, controlled by conservative lawmakers, voted in early March to fast-track the legislation, foregoing committee debates. The bill will likely go to a vote in April.

It is unclear whether the vote will receive enough support to advance to the Senate. But one thing is certain: The rural bloc, known as the Agricultural Parliamentary Front (FPA), is sure to push for the bill to pass.

In an official statement (<https://deputadosergiosouza.com.br/noticias/presidente-da-fpa-defende-producao-agricola-em-terras-indigenas-no-brasil/>), FPA president Sérgio Souza asserted that the FPA "defends agricultural production on Indigenous lands in Brazil." Their plan isn't to take away the rights of Indigenous people to their land, language and culture, he says. Rather, it is to afford them "the right to choose how they want to live economically and socially."

For Indigenous communities, his words ring hollow and echo the false promises they've been offered by colonizers for centuries. Their rights are something they have had to continuously fight to protect.

Indigenous peoples from across the country will be attending the 18th edition of Free Land Camp (<https://apiboficial.org/at12022/?lang=en>) (Acampamento Terra Livre) from April 4 to 14—an annual event in the capital city of Brasília—held to draw attention to violations of Indigenous rights and demand change. This year, one of those demands will be to put a stop to bill 191/2020.

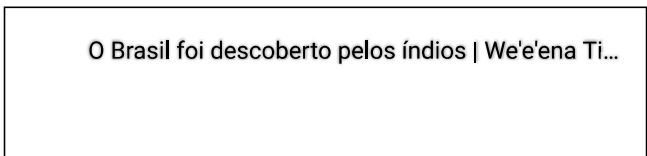
We'e'ena Tikuna was 12 when she heard Portuguese for the first time.

Her first 11 years were spent in Tikuna Umariáçu, an Indigenous territory in the Brazilian Amazon that belongs to the Tikuna, the most populous Indigenous group in Brazil, on the Solimões River, bordering Peru and Colombia. Indigete (<https://www.indigete.org/join-us-as-a-member?source=indigestory&campaign=701411000001064042>) and history from her parents, grandparents, and other leaders in the community.

But her parents wanted their six children to understand more. So the family moved to Manaus, the capital city of the state of Amazonas, where the children went to school and learned Portuguese.

High school in Manaus was hard. Studying in an entirely new language and cultural environment, and faced with incessant bullying and racism, We'e'ena struggled in school. It was a painful process, but she knew it would help her in the long run. The stories she heard from her grandfather—now 88 years old and a respected shaman in the Tikuna Umariáçu community—as a child had stuck with her. She was determined to ensure that history did not repeat itself.

Now, at 33, We'e'ena is an artist, nutritionist, and Indigenous rights activist in Alter do Chão, in Brazil Pará state, which is home to several Indigenous territories and a hotbed for illegal mining. There she has access to information that otherwise might not reach her village, where her entire family still lives. She works to make sure the Tikuna know what's going on in government buildings far from their territory—she's able to talk to them on a regular basis thanks to Tikuna Umariáçu's internet connection and makes the week-long boat trip back home at least once a year—but also spreads awareness to others about the destruction of the Amazon and the violations of Indigenous rights that go hand-in-hand with it on her YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/c/WeeenaTikuna/featured>), and by speaking at events like TEDx (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvFlcfkbclY>) Laçador.





“Our weapon, our power, today is technology, it’s the internet,” says We’e’ena. “Things used to happen in the dark of night. But not anymore.”

As Bill 191/2020 makes its way swiftly through Congress, environmentalists and land defenders worry about the impacts it could have if it passes.

Federal protections for recognized Indigenous land like the Tikuna Umariáçu territory are some of the best defenses against deforestation in the Amazon. According to [a study \(https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ambiente/2021/03/terras-indigenas-concentram- apenas-3-do-desmatamento-na-amazonia-aponta-estudo.shtml\)](https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ambiente/2021/03/terras-indigenas-concentram- apenas-3-do-desmatamento-na-amazonia-aponta-estudo.shtml), by the National Institute for Space Research (INPE), from January to December 2020, just 3% of deforestation in the Amazon region happened on Indigenous land.

But even now, illegal mining on Indigenous territories causes immense harm to both the environment and the health of those living there.

Currently, 93.7% of mining activity in Brazil occurs in the Amazon, according to data collected by [MapBiomas \(https://mapbiomas.org/en/area-ocupada-pela-mineracao-no-brasil-cresce-mais-de-6-vezes-entre-1985-e-2020?cama\\_set\\_language=en&mc\\_cid=44c898340f&mc\\_eid=3ddfe29860\)](https://mapbiomas.org/en/area-ocupada-pela-mineracao-no-brasil-cresce-mais-de-6-vezes-entre-1985-e-2020?cama_set_language=en&mc_cid=44c898340f&mc_eid=3ddfe29860).

Gold mining is rampant across the region, leading to [deforestation \(https://www.codastory.com/\)](https://www.codastory.com/) and contamination of the environment through deforestation, but also contaminating water and soil with mercury used by miners to separate the prized mineral from other substances. The mercury contaminates water used for drinking and bathing, and seeps into fish, a main food source for many Indigenous peoples. [Public health research \(https://portal.fiocruz.br/noticia/estudo-analisa-contaminacao-por-mercurio-entre-o-povo-indigena-munduruku\)](https://portal.fiocruz.br/noticia/estudo-analisa-contaminacao-por-mercurio-entre-o-povo-indigena-munduruku) has shown that mercury is causing illness among people of all ages in Indigenous communities, and leading to developmental challenges for children.

Without federal protections of their land, the situation is only expected to get worse. For Indigenous groups like the Tikuna, passing this bill is life or death.

“We don’t want this,” We’e’ena says. “These conditions that are being created are going to kill us.”

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Jill Langlois is an award-winning independent journalist based in São Paulo, Brazil. She has been freelancing from the largest city in the Western Hemisphere since 2010, writing and reporting for publications like National Geographic, The New York Times, and The Guardian. Her work focuses on human rights, science and the environment, and the impact of socioeconomic issues on people's lives.

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