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FÓRUM SOBRE VIOLAÇÕES DE DIREITOS DOS POVOS INDÍGENAS

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Covid-19: indigenous organizations warn of genocidal negligence by the Brazilian government

The text outlines the seriousness of the emergency in indigenous health due to the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic among the native peoples of Brazil. The number of deaths and infections of indigenous people in the state with the largest native population, Amazonas, and the state with the largest numbers of indigenous people outside the Amazon region, Mato Grosso do Sul, illustrate the problems arising from the failure of the Ministry of Health's Special Department for Indigenous Health (SESAI) to fund the healthcare districts, the under-notification of cases, the lack of a structure for emergency action, and the invasion of indigenous territories (ITs) by illegal gold prospectors, land-grabbers and timber cutters. One can only conclude that the negligence and violations of rights by the Brazilian State represent systematic violence that is causing genocide among the indigenous peoples of Brazil.

The report issued by the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil Organization (APIB) on Jun 11, 2020 shows that COVID-19 is now affecting indigenous peoples in every region of the country, with 264 deaths and 2,950 people infected among 97 tribes. There has been a 800% increase in deaths in two weeks and the fatality rate is now 9,6%, whereas in the population at large it is 6% (APIB, 06/11/2020). On top of the extreme vulnerability of these peoples to viral infections, there are problems such as the breakdown of the indigenous health system, invasions of indigenous lands by illegal gold prospectors, timber cutters and land-grabbers, and the failure of the State to provide resources or hire healthcare professionals. All this has led the APIB to denounce the situation as genocide by the federal government and a crime against humanity.

Amazonas, the state with the largest indigenous population (almost 200,000 people) also has the highest number of deaths – 133 (06/11/2020), according to APIB. On June 11 the total number of cases of Covid-19 reached 53,989, with 2,400 deaths (Amazonas Health Surveillance Foundation (FVS-AM), 06/11/2020). Among indigenous people, there were 933 confirmed cases and 40 deaths (FVS-AM, 05/31/2020). A large number of infections in ITs were caused by people returning to their communities after attempting to obtain social benefits in urban centers. Due to the lack of structure in the towns in the interior of the state, for instance on the Upper Rio Negro, to provide healthcare of medium or high complexity, there is a need to transfer patients to places with hospitals and ICU beds for inpatients.

A report issued by the Brazilian Amazon Indigenous Organizations Coordination (06/09/20, COIAB), gives a total of 228 deaths, 2,908 confirmed cases and 386 suspected cases in the

Amazon region¹. SGC-AM has reported 2,376 confirmed cases, 462 under observation and 28 deaths, according to the COVID-19 Report of the Municipal Health Department-SGC (SEMSA, 06/12/2020). A recent study suggests that 110 ITs in Amazonas State (AM) are endangered. Lacking both proper structure (vehicles, reference hospitals, drugs, PPE, respirators) and staff, the seven Special Indigenous Health Districts (DSEIs) in AM are unable to provide the emergency care necessary. They are anxiously awaiting funds, supplies and staff from SESAI/MS. None of the DSEIs has met the requirement for a contingency plan for epidemics for Isolated Recently Contacted Indigenous Peoples (PIIRC) under Joint Ordinance 4.094 of 12/20/2018 (FUNAI/SESAI), in spite of the fact that the Hupd'äh, Yuhupdëh, Yanomami, Ye'kuana, Suruwaha and Korubo peoples are considered extremely vulnerable.

Increasing numbers of invasions by illegal gold prospectors, timber cutters and land-grabbers add to the risk of violent attacks and contamination by the coronavirus. The Yanomami lands alone have been invaded by 20,000 prospectors.

Outside the Amazon region, in Mato Grosso do Sul – where more than 80,000 indigenous people live – there is a climate of apprehension about the arrival of the disease in the villages. The Dourados Indigenous Reserve (MS), the largest in the state with nearly 20,000 inhabitants of the Kaiowá, Guarani and Terena nations, has so far recorded 86 cases of coronavirus. Last weekend, two cases were also confirmed in the Caarapó Reserve, the third most populous in the region inhabited by the Kaiowá and Guarani – Brazil's second largest indigenous people.

In addition to the risk situation in Mato Grosso do Sul, the APIB note indicates that in Pernambuco and Ceará the indigenous peoples are also feeling the effects of the collapse of the healthcare system caused by the pandemic. In these two states there have been 19 deaths, and a further 52 in Pará, where large numbers of people have also been hospitalized (06/11/2020).

The failures of the Bolsonaro government and its violations of human rights hark back to the necro-policy of the military dictatorship which used the dismantling of the indigenous healthcare system, deliberate contamination with infectious and contagious diseases, forced removals and torture as the basis for indigenous genocide. Given the seriousness of the situation, with the coronavirus epidemic advancing, more organization and speed will be required of municipal, state and federal bodies in taking effective emergency action. The lack of testing, and the failure to monitor the community database or to investigate the large number of deaths of people with symptoms of viral infection, puts the accuracy of official statistics on the epidemic in doubt. Partnerships with universities and research centers, civil society entities, indigenous organizations and international health cooperative bodies, as well as denunciations of crimes against humanity, will be fundamental in facing the crisis.

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¹ Based on a survey of indigenous leaders, healthcare professionals and indigenous organizations.