

Christian missionaries gain access to Amazon's Indigenous peoples, despite pandemic

by [Eduardo Campos Lima](#) in the [September 23, 2020](#) issue



Two members of the Asháninka tribe in Brazil (Photo from the Brazilian Ministry of Culture, used under Creative License)

When the first COVID-19 cases hit Brazil in March, the government agency in charge of protecting the country's Indigenous peoples, the National Indian Foundation, ordered all civilians to leave the Indigenous reservations. Only essential workers, such as health-care personnel and those involved in food distribution, could remain.

But a new law signed by President Jair Bolsonaro on July 7 has made an exception for one group: Christian missionaries. A simple form from a doctor vouching for a faith worker's health is enough to allow the person to stay as an essential worker.

According to Eliesio Marubo, a lawyer for the Indigenous Peoples Association of the River Javari Valley, known as UNIVAJA, some missionaries had never heeded the order to leave.

“A few villages reported that there were evangelical missionaries in their areas who refused to go away,” said Marubo.

In April, UNIVAJA sued to force the expulsion of several evangelical missionaries, at least two of whom are US citizens, from the Javari Valley, an important legal victory against a group that is closely aligned with Bolsonaro.

Now, Indigenous groups and those who defend their rights worry that the new law will prompt missionaries to enter their reservations, which have long been protected by the Brazilian government in an effort to preserve their culture.

“We’re questioning the legislation in order to restore the self-determination prerogative of the Indigenous peoples,” explained Marubo, a member of the Indigenous Marubo people.

One of the missionaries expelled after the April lawsuit was Andrew Tonkin, a member of Frontier International Mission, an independent Free Will Baptist mission ministry based in the US. One of its goals, according to its website, is to “establish mission work among the unreached Indigenous people groups across the world.”

According to a story published by the Brazilian newspaper *O Globo* in March, Tonkin tried last year to get to an Indigenous reserve off the Javari River.

Tonkin said the federal government granted him permission to go “into the reserve” to “help and better the life of the people. The people in the reserve also have every right as a community to invite who they wish to visit their village.”

Tonkin said his efforts in the Javari Valley are “a spiritual battle against evil and against darkness” and are not about “people and policy.”

Beto Marubo, one of UNIVAJA’s coordinators, dismissed Tonkin’s claim that he is welcomed by residents of the valley. “The only Indigenous persons who don’t oppose their presence are the ones who were catechized by them,” he said.

Marubo explained that previous encounters with the non-Indigenous society often ended in violence, especially during the Amazon rubber boom, which ended in the

1940s and saw many Indigenous people killed in their forests.

Sydney Possuelo, who created the National Indian Foundation's department of isolated peoples in the 1980s, explained that missionaries often offer gifts, particularly much-needed iron tools.

"Attracted by them, the isolated Indigenous peoples agree to listen to preachers. So, you attract them through their fragility, through the technical unbalance between our societies. That's not exactly a Christian principle," he said.

"Religious proselytism can have a great impact on their way of living," Possuelo added. "The Indigenous peoples don't have a formal religion, with regular services and a supreme god. In general, they celebrate the transformative heroes who taught them to fish, to produce maize and cassava, to sing and dance."

Other Christian groups that have been working with Indigenous groups for decades also say missionaries are more interested in conversion than in helping the isolated Amazonians.

"The Indigenous peoples' spirituality should be respected, according to the constitution," said Jandira Keppi, project adviser for the Lutheran Diakonia Foundation, which is dedicated to working with socially vulnerable groups and poor communities. "But the fundamentalists believe they must evangelize them for their salvation. This always meant death for the Indigenous peoples, and their history proves it."

That's no less true during the current pandemic, said Keppi, who noted that Indigenous people have "very low" immunity.

Cleber Buzzato, assistant secretary of the Catholic Church's Indigenous Missionary Council, agreed that "every possible contact established with isolated peoples should be their initiative and not the outsiders'."

Marubo believes the Bolsonaro administration supports the missionaries' activities in the Amazon. "He's backed by the evangelicals. There's a plan behind all this: the missionaries get into those territories, dismantle the policy of no contact, and then the landowners appear to grab their lands," he said.

In February, Bolsonaro appointed the evangelical pastor and anthropologist Ricardo Lopes Dias to coordinate FUNAI's department of isolated Indigenous peoples. Dias

worked with the Brazilian New Tribes Mission for several years.

“It’s all being orchestrated by the current administration,” Marubo said. —Religion News Service