

Doctor warns COVID-19 can decimate Brazil's indigenous peoples



Brasilia, March 26 (RHC)-- The Sao Paulo Federal University (UNIFESP) researcher Sofia Mendonca Wednesday warned that Brazilian Indigenous peoples can be decimated by the COVID-19 pandemic if there are no forceful containment actions.

"There is an incredible risk that the virus will spread through communities and cause genocide," says Mendonca, who is the coordinator of Xingu, a health promotion project that UNIFESP has been carrying out in the Xingu river basin (in the states of Mato Grosso and Para) for 50 years.

As COVID-19 spreads across Brazil, fears grow that indigenous communities will be decimated by respiratory diseases, which have traditionally been the leading cause of death among indigenous populations.

Furthermore, indigenous families survive in very precarious economic situations and depend on social protection programs such as Bolsa Familia, which provides them with monetary income to buy some food in the cities.

Under current conditions, however, isolation to avoid Covid-19 makes it difficult for indigenous peoples to acquire basic goods.

Dr. Mendoca also mentioned that the collective memory of previous epidemics such as measles could stimulate communities to divide into smaller groups and seek refuge within the forest. "After stocking up on hunting and fishing supplies, some will go out into the field and wait there until the threat subsides," she said.

This health scientist highlighted that many indigenous families cannot wash their hands frequently or implement other methods to reduce contagion that city dwellers can carry out.

There is also a probability of an increase in infections due to some Indigenous peoples' ways of life, which include sharing utensils such as glasses or living in homes with many people.

Currently, the Brazilian state recognizes the existence of 107 isolated Indigenous groups in the Amazon basin. Another risk factor for them is constant incursions of loggers, miners, hunters, and Christian missionaries, who may be COVID-19 carriers.

Over the last year, under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right politician well known for his hate speech, the Bolsa Familia money transfer program has come under constant criticism. But the problem is not only that.

According to the Catholic bishop Roque Paloschi, who is the president of the Indigenous Missionary Council, the federal government does little to protect the poor. "We are concerned that the government will take advantage of the situation and withdraw all assistance to the communities," Paloschi said and added that the eviction of Indigenous peoples from their territories is always a possibility.

"In this pandemic, the government has no plan to deal with the most basic needs of not only indigenous peoples but also the poorest and most vulnerable people," the priest added.

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