

Missionaries tell indigenous Brazilians that vaccine will turn you into an alligator

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Funeral service workers remove the body of a coronavirus victim in Amazonas state, Brazil.
(Photo: AP)

Brasilia, February 14 (RHC)-- Leaders of Brazil's indigenous communities say evangelical missionaries are scaring people away from receiving coronavirus vaccine in remote villages, accusing far-right President Jair Bolsonaro being behind the campaign.

Health workers, sent for immunization of Brazil's remote indigenous villages, said they encountered fierce resistance in some communities in the region. "Religious fundamentalists and evangelical missionaries are preaching against the vaccine," said Dinamam Tuxá, a leader of APIB, Brazil's largest indigenous organization.

"It's not happening in all villages," said Claudemir da Silva, an indigenous leader. "Just in those that have missionaries or evangelical chapels where pastors are convincing the people not to receive the vaccine." He said the missionaries convinced people that "they will turn into an alligator and other crazy ideas" if they received the vaccine. That has added to fears that the pandemic could spread through Brazil's more than 800,000 indigenous people.

Brazil has been hit hard in the pandemic, with some 9,713,909 coronavirus cases and 236,201 deaths. Tribal leaders blame President Bolsonaro and some of his allies in the evangelical community for stoking skepticism about the vaccination program.

Bolsonaro has repeatedly played down the severity of the deadly virus and refused to take a vaccine himself. "If you take the vaccine and turn into an alligator, it's your problem," the president said in December. He added sarcastically: "If you turn into Superman or women grow beards, I have nothing to do with that."

Earlier this week, the Association of Brazilian Anthropologists denounced unspecified religious groups for spreading false conspiracy theories to "sabotage" the vaccination of indigenous people.

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