

Brazilian president signs demarcation of six Indigenous lands

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Brasilia, April 28 (RHC)-- Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has announced the formal recognition of six Indigenous reservations, fulfilling a campaign promise to reverse the policy of his far-right predecessor Jair Bolsonaro.

The reservations on Friday were the first to be effectively recognized by the government since 2016 because one recognition in 2018 was overturned by a court.

Lula made the announcement as part of an annual meeting called the Free Land Camp in Brasilia of representatives of Brazil's one million Indigenous people. "I won't leave a single Indigenous territory unprotected," the president said.

Indigenous leaders had called on Lula to speed up the recognition of 300 Indigenous territories that have been mapped out but have waited years to be formally recognised.

Bolsonaro, who was backed by Brazil's agricultural sector and its powerful farm lobby, promised publicly never to allow "one more centimetre" of land for reservations, saying Indigenous people had too much land for so few people.

About 300 Indigenous groups live on 730 territories that they consider ancestral lands, mainly in the Amazon rainforest, but only 434 of those territories have been officially recognized. "It is a time-consuming process, but we are going to make sure that as many Indigenous reserves as possible are legalised," Lula said on Friday.

"If we want to achieve zero deforestation by 2030, we need registered Indigenous reserves." The designation prohibits mining activities on the land and requires specific authorisations for commercial farming and logging. Non-Indigenous people are also banned from engaging in economic activity on Indigenous lands.

Two of the six new reservations are in the Amazon. A study in 2022 showed that Indigenous reservations in Brazil have acted over the past 30 years as a defense against deforestation in the Amazon, the world's largest rainforest, which is vital for moderating the global climate.

By keeping his promise, Lula is showing the world he intends to strengthen the rights of Indigenous people and protect the rainforest, said Toerris Jaeger, head of the environmental NGO Rainforest Foundation Norway. "Indigenous areas are crucial to preserving the Amazon, the world's central bank for biological diversity ... Indigenous people are the ones best able to guard this wealth," he said.

Farm sector representatives in the Brazilian Congress are calling for the passage of legislation that would set a cut-off date for reservations that were not occupied at the time Brazil's current constitution was enacted in 1988.

The deadline, which would leave tens of thousands of Indigenous people without the protection of official reservation land, is also being debated by the Supreme Court, which is expected to rule in July. With no state protection, Indigenous communities are in danger of invasions by illegal loggers and wildcat gold miners. Those incidents surged under Bolsonaro, who wanted to allow commercial agriculture and mining even on recognised reservations.

Bolsonaro gutted the government's Indigenous affairs agency Funai, which began to work for non-Indigenous interests in land conflicts, anthropologists and community leaders said.

Lula created a Ministry of Indigenous People on his first day in office in January and named Sonia Guajajara, the leader of the main Indigenous umbrella organization APIB, to head it.

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