

Evangelical missionary leads Brazilian office for isolated Indigenous tribes



Brasilia, February 8 (RHC)-- The government of ultra-right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro has confirmed the appointment of an evangelical missionary to head the office responsible for Brazil's uncontacted Indigenous peoples.

Despite an overwhelmingly negative reaction to the nomination from national and international organizations, the Indigenous Affairs Agency (FUNAI) designated pastor Ricardo Lopes Dias as director of the Uncontacted Indigenous Department. The department is charged with protecting roughly 114 Indigenous populations who live in isolation.

The pastor worked for years with U.S.-based missionary organization New Tribes Mission (NTM), now known as Ethnos360. Active in Amazonia since the 1950s, NTM has drawn complaints about its methods from leaders of Indigenous communities in the region.

CIMI, a missionary council affiliated with Brazil's Catholic bishops conference, joined Indigenous organizations in condemning the choice of Dias to run the Uncontacted Indigenous Department.

“The Bolsonaro government shows clear signs of abandoning the policy of respect for the right of free existence for those peoples,” CIMI said, accusing the president of seeking to use “religious fundamentalism as an instrument to make room in these areas for large landowners and miners.”

“Historically, our families suffered from the activity of proselytizing missionaries, many of them connected to the NTM, which forcibly contacted our grandfathers through lies, violence and threats,” the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations in Brazilian Amazonia (Coiab) said in a statement.

Survival International, a global NGO concerned with the rights of indigenous peoples, also weighed in on the appointment of Dias. “Putting an evangelical missionary in charge of the Uncontacted Indigenous Department of FUNAI is like putting a fox in charge of the hen-house. It’s an open act of aggression, a declaration that they want to forcibly contact these tribes, which will destroy them,” Survival’s Sarah Shenker said.

UN special rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous people Victoria Tauli-Corpuz also warned: “This is a dangerous decision that may have the potential to cause genocide among isolated Indigenous people.”

Last month, 600 leaders of 45 of Brazil’s indigenous peoples published an open letter denouncing the Bolsonaro administration for pursuing a program of “genocide, ethnocide and ecocide” with the aim of opening indigenous reserves to extractive industry and agri-business.

Bolsonaro has said that roughly 14 percent of Brazilian territory set aside for the Indigenous people is excessive and has vowed to reduce lands for Indigenous peoples.

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