

Editors call on Brazil to urgently step up search for UK reporter

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Demonstrators hold placards and roses to demand action to find journalist Dom Phillips and Indigenous expert Bruno Araujo Pereira, outside the Brazilian Embassy in London [Toby Melville/Reuters]

London, June 10 (RHC)-- International news editors have called on authorities in Brazil to “urgently step up” their efforts to locate British journalist Dom Phillips and Indigenous expert Bruno Araujo Pereira, who have gone missing in a remote part of the Brazilian Amazon.

In an open letter addressed to Brazilian government officials, editors at The Guardian, The New York Times, The Associated Press and several other major media outlets expressed “extreme concern regarding the safety and whereabouts” of the two men.

“We are now very concerned by reports from Brazil that search and rescue efforts so far have been minimally resourced, with national authorities slow to offer more than very limited assistance,” reads the letter, which was addressed to President Jair Bolsonaro and Brazil’s ministers of foreign affairs and defence.

“We ask that you urgently step up and fully resource the effort to locate Dom and Bruno, and that you provide all possible support to their families and friends.”

Witnesses said they last saw Phillips, a freelance journalist who has written for The Guardian and The Washington Post, on Sunday.

He was on a reporting trip in the Javari Valley, a remote jungle area on the border between Peru and Colombia that is home to the world’s largest number of uncontacted Indigenous people, with Pereira, a former official with Brazil’s federal Indigenous agency, FUNAI.

Cocaine-smuggling gangs, as well as illegal hunters and fishermen, are active in the area. The men’s disappearance has prompted urgent calls for action, with politicians, press freedom groups, journalists and Indigenous leaders in Brazil demanding that Bolsonaro’s government devote more resources to find them.

The far-right president also was widely criticised after he described the pair’s work in the Amazon as an “adventure.” “Really, just two people in a boat in a completely wild region like that is not a recommended adventure. Anything could happen. It could be an accident, it could be that they have been killed,” he said in an interview with television network SBT. “We hope and ask God that they’re found soon. The armed forces are working hard.”

Brazilian authorities have begun using helicopters in their search, after a Brazilian federal court issued an order on Wednesday telling authorities to provide helicopters and more boats following a request filed by local Indigenous association Univaja and the federal public defender’s office.

At an evening news conference, federal police showed multiple images and videos of the area taken earlier that day from a helicopter. In her decision, Judge Jaiza Maria Pinto noted that she had ordered the Indigenous affairs agency to maintain protections in the region after a 2019 case filed by Univaja reported multiple attacks by criminals. Despite that order, she said, the territory “has been maintained in a situation of low protection and supervision”.

Civil police in Amazonas State also said on Wednesday that they had identified a suspect, who was arrested for allegedly carrying a firearm without a permit, which is common practice in the region.

“We’re looking for a possible link, but for now, we have nothing,” Carlos Alberto Mansur, the state’s public security secretary, said at a news conference. The suspect, Amarildo da Costa de Oliveira, also known as “Pelado”, remained in custody, he said.

Police have questioned five others since the investigation started, but no arrest related to the disappearances has been made, authorities said in their first joint public address.

The Reuters news agency, citing three Brazilian police officers who requested anonymity to discuss an ongoing investigation, said police are focusing on people involved in illegal fishing and poaching in Indigenous lands.

“The principal criminal hypothesis at this point is that the people involved, and their motive, was related to illegal fishing and poaching activities in indigenous territories,” a senior Brazilian federal police officer tracking the case closely told the news agency.

Meanwhile, Phillips’ family and supporters held a vigil outside the Brazilian embassy in London on Thursday and urged officials to address why it took so long for the search to begin.

“We had to come this morning, to ask the question: where is Dom Phillips? Where is Bruno Pereira?” Phillips’ sister, Sian, told reporters. “We are here to make the point that why did it take so long for them to start the search for my brother and for Bruno. We want the search to carry on.”

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