

GENOCIDE FINGERPRINTS IN THE THE BRAZILIAN YANOMAMI HORROR

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The Spanish language has a very handy expression that can be universally employed to describe things that one would wish were secret but everyone knows: 'secreto a voces', in English, an 'open secret'. This expression particularly fits situations when people, especially those with decision-making power, deliberately choose (through either neutrality or collaboration) to ignore the behaviors of others, whatever those might be.

As we all know, it was definitely an open secret, a 'secreto a voces', that the former Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro, never held the indigenous populations or any other minorities of his country in much esteem. In a speech given to his supporters at the beginning of his term, he felt free to holler, loud and clear, that any minorities would have to 'bow to the majority', indicating an imminent somber period that would haunt the Brazilian people for the years to come.

That any politician elected to hold office might have such opinions would already be cause for concern, but even worse when that person is the president of one of the largest countries in the world, known for its democratic tradition after a 21-year military dictatorship that lasted from 1964 to 1985.

Also, that hate speech can easily turn into criminal actions is another openly known fact. Indeed, one should not look far back in history to realize that major crimes such as genocide had their way previously paved by hate speech and propaganda. Furthermore, when coming from leaders and boosted by social media, this type of speech encourages adepts to increase the tone and

violence of their words and actions, thus giving way to the legitimization of violence.

However, although a preliminary mechanism, hate speech by itself is not a perpetrator of genocide. This term, coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944 and solidified in the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention, defines genocide as any of five "acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." These five acts are: 1) killing members of a group; 2) causing them serious bodily or mental harm; 3) imposing living conditions intended to destroy the group; 4) preventing births; and 4) forcibly transferring children out of the group. Victims are not randomly targeted, with persecution stemming from their real or perceived membership in a group.

The famed Holocaust scholar, Raul Hilberg, defined, in his masterpiece "The Destruction of the European Jews," a set of terms known as "Six Stages of Mass Murder": **Definition, Isolation, Emigration, Ghettoization, Deportation, and Mass Murder**. This set was established in the context of the Shoah, the mass murder of Jews and other minorities in Europe under Nazi rule. However, these six steps are easily observed, either fully or in part, in every genocide action conducted anywhere on the globe. Sadly, that appears to be the case of the catastrophe exposed in the last few weeks in northern Brazil with the indigenous Yanomami people.

The Yanomami people are a society of hunters and farmers in the Amazon rainforest whose contact with society is relatively recent.

Their territory covers approximately 192,999 square kilometers, on both sides of the border between Brazil and Venezuela. However, the ferocious advance of illegal mining in the indigenous reservation has devastated the Yanomami land and water, put down large forest areas, contaminated rivers, and spread violence and severe social and sanitary problems.

Data from the Brazilian Ministry of Health revealed that, from 1987 to 1997, about 14% of the Yanomami died because of diseases transmitted by miners. Also, a 2022 report by the Illegal Mining Monitoring System of the Indigenous Yanomami Land has highlighted that, in the five years prior to 2022, the Yanomami territory in northern Brazil lived the worst moment since the first invasion 30 years ago.

The level of the hecatomb was so severe that, just in the first two months of 2023, at least 42 Yanomami died of hunger-related diseases, including many children and with reports of dozens of more deaths deep into the forest.

The Brazilian government, since January 1st, under the leadership of President Lula, promptly began to provide the necessary aid to stop the deaths by providing medical assistance, distributing food, and starting, at last, to expel illegal miners and other criminals from the Yanomami land.

However, as the country watched, astonished, at the unfolding of the terrible news that revealed horrific footage of malnourished children and agonizing elders, an important question was almost immediately asked: "how could the previous government not have known about the horror on course at the Yanomami land"? Questions could be stretched even further to: "if the government knew, why were no measures put into effect to stop the deaths, provide food, vaccines, and medical assistance to those people?", and "was this destruction an intentional action of Jair Bolsonaro's government?"

If we apply Hilberg's six steps of destruction to the Yanomami tragedy, at least four of them can fit to describe the crimes committed against that people: first, the **definition** should not be understood here as their legitimate identity as an indigenous people but rather by the continuous stressing that they did not belong to the majority once in power, thus having to bow to the ruling regime. Thus, they are defined. Second, **isolation** should not be confused with their traditional and millennia-long forest homes but rather as the intentional actions carried out by the Brazilian government under Jair Bolsonaro to insulate the Yanomami from contact and avoid the unfolding of the scandal now exposed. Third, **ghettoization** was achieved by turning the once rich and diverse Yanomami forests, land, and water into incubators of hunger, disease, and poverty through the ferocious destruction carried out by numberless miners. Finally, the fourth step was the ultimate goal of the six: **mass murder**.

Contrary to what some might think, genocide is not only carried out with bullets, mass graves, and gas chambers. It is also the result of years-long deliberate actions aimed at weakening a once-strong group of people with the purpose of making them gradually disappear. There is little room for doubt that that was what was happening with the Yanomami in the last few years.

However, it is necessary to stress that not only a reaction response is in order, by providing the Yanomami with necessary assistance, food, medical care, and whatever else is necessary to safeguard them. More than that, all perpetrators should be held accountable for their actions so that any crimes against humanity do not go unpunished, and not a single more human being may have to suffer and die because of who they are. **Justice for the Yanomami!**