



BRAZILIAN NATIONAL BISHOPS CONFERENCE (CNBB)

Episcopal Council for the Amazon

NOTE FROM THE BISHOPS OF THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACT ON THE POPULATION AND THE RAINFOREST

"You must label the economic operations that damage the Amazon with their proper name: injustice and crime"

"You must be indignant."

(Pope Francis - *Querida Amazônia*)

We, the Bishops of the Amazon, in the face of the uncontrolled advance of COVID-19 across Brazil, especially in the Amazon, express our immense concern and demand greater attention from the federal and state governments to this disease that is increasingly spreading throughout the region. The peoples of the Amazon demand special attention from the authorities so that their lives are not further violated. The mortality rate is one of the highest in the country and society is already witnessing the collapse of health systems in major cities like Manaus and Belém. The statistics reported by the media do not correspond to reality. Testing is insufficient to know the real expansion of the virus. Many people with evident symptoms of the disease die at home without medical assistance or access to a hospital.

It is up to public authorities to implement responsible policies that support the most vulnerable sections of the population. Indigenous peoples, quilombolas, and other traditional communities are at great risk. This risk also extends to the forest, given the important role these communities play in its conservation.

The data is alarming: the region has the lowest proportion of hospitals in the country. Extensive areas of the Amazon have no ICU beds at all and only a few municipalities meet the minimum requirements recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO), regarding number of beds and ICUs per inhabitant (10 ICU beds per 100,000 users).

Besides the forest peoples, urban populations, especially those in the peripheries, have their living conditions further degraded by a lack of basic sanitation, housing, food and employment opportunities. Migrants, refugees, urban indigenous people, industrial workers, domestic workers, and those who live from the informal economy are all crying out for better health protection. It is the State's obligation to guarantee them the rights stated in the Federal Constitution by offering minimum conditions which will help them get through this difficult time.

Legal and illegal mining, as well as deforestation for soybean plantations and cattle ranching have been increasing alarmingly in recent years. According to the Deter-B system, developed by the National Institute of Space Research (INPE), deforestation in the Amazon forest grew 279.9% in March 2020, compared to the same month the previous year. Contributing to this growth is the notorious loosening of land inspections and the continuous political discourse against environmental protection and indigenous areas protected by the Federal Constitution (Art. 231 and 232). The coronavirus has exacerbated the existing socio-environmental crisis, meaning we are now starting to see an immense humanitarian tragedy caused by a structural collapse. With the Amazon being more and more deforested each day, successive pandemics even worse than this one may come.

We are immensely concerned about the increase in violence in the countryside, which is 23% higher than in 2018. In 2019 84% of the murders (27 out of 32) and 73% of the assassination attempts (22 out of 30) took place in the Amazon, according to data from the "Caderno Conflitos no Campo Brasil 2019", a Pastoral Land Commission (CPT Nacional) publication. The causes of the increase in violence and deforestation of the Amazon forest are undoubtedly the extinction, scrapping, financial restructuring and political instrumentalization of agencies such as the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA), the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), the Brazilian Institute of the Environment (IBAMA) and agricultural, environmental and labour inspection and control agencies. We are also concerned about the Militarization of the Commission for the Amazon, which was transferred from the Ministry of Environment to the Vice Presidency of the Republic.

We, the Bishops of the Brazilian Amazon who have signed this note, call upon the Church and the rest of society to demand the following urgent measures from the Federal Government, the National Congress, the State Governments and the Legislative Assemblies:

- To save human lives, rebuild communities and relationships by strengthening public policies, especially the Single Health System (SUS);
- To reject discourse that discredits the effectiveness of scientific strategies;
- To adopt restrictive measures on the entry of people into all indigenous territories, due to the risk of transmission of the coronavirus, except for professionals of the Indigenous Special Sanitary Districts (DSEI);
- To carry out testing on the indigenous population in order to adopt the necessary isolation measures and avoid the dissemination of COVID-19;
- To provide personal protective equipment (PPE) recommended by the World Health Organization, in adequate quantity and with correct instructions for use and disposal;
- To protect health professionals who are working on the frontline both physically and psychologically
- To guarantee the food security of the indigenous communities, quilombolas, riverine communities and other traditional populations of the Amazon;
- To strengthen inspection measures against deforestation and artisanal mining especially in indigenous and traditional lands;
- To guarantee the participation of civil society, social movements and representatives of traditional populations in the spaces of political decision making;
- To reject Provisional Measure 910/2019, which proposes new land regularization in Brazil, as it eliminates agrarian reform and regularization of territories among original and traditional peoples. It favours land grabbing, deforestation and exploitative enterprises, regularizes illegal occupations made by agribusiness, promotes the liquidation of public lands at extremely low prices, authorizes the acquisition of land by foreign investors and the speculative exploitation of the forest, and encourages the invasion and devastation of indigenous lands and traditional territories;
- To reject PL 191/2020 which regulates Article 176.1 and Article 231.3 of the Federal Constitution establishing the specific conditions for research and extraction of mineral and water resources on indigenous lands.
- To revoke Decree nº 10.239/2020, returning the Commission for the Amazon to the Ministry of the Environment, with the participation of representatives of FUNAI and IBAMA and other civil society organizations, indigenous-led or supporting such as the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), which operates in the Amazon.

After a rich process of listening during the Amazon Synod, the Church in the region is attentive to the situation and its demands. We echo the cry of the Poor and the cry of the Earth. We want to ensure urgent measures are taken to stop harmful activities and, at the same time, investments are made into alternative models of progress and development in the region. The model we currently have has failed: it continues to destroy the Amazon and put the lives of its people at risk.

Our Lady of Nazareth, Queen of the Amazon, accompany us and help us in our desire to serve the poor and in the uncompromising defence of justice and truth.

Brasília,/April 2020.

Signatories: