



## Uncontacted tribes and the right to self-determination

### A Survival International statement

There are more than one hundred uncontacted tribes around the world. In some places, their land is relatively intact, they are thriving, and their populations appear to be growing. Where their lands are stolen and invaded, however, there is growing evidence that they are fighting for their survival and living on the run, fleeing from the invaders. They are being killed by diseases and violence brought by outsiders, and whole peoples are being wiped out. They are the most vulnerable peoples on the planet.

Some uncontacted tribes are nomadic hunter-gatherers. Others live in semi-permanent villages. Some have populations in excess of 100. Others number a few dozen, and one uncontacted tribe in Rondonia state, Brazil, consists of just one man, thought to be the only survivor of massacres by cattle ranchers. All depend completely on their land for their survival.

Uncontacted tribes' right to self-determination, enshrined in national and international law and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, is often overlooked or intentionally ignored and violated. There has been a steady stream of media attention, particularly since 2008, but uncontacted tribes' own voices are, by definition, missing.

Those desperate to steal their territories frequently attempt to use uncontacted tribes' "absence" from national and international fora and "consultation" processes to argue their case. They present a wide array of excuses, from the denial of uncontacted tribes' existence to claims that they could benefit from "western" hospitals and schools, claims that they stand no chance of surviving in their forests and that they are destined to "disappear", and, in the case of extremist missionaries, a fierce determination to bring the "word of God". Any forced contact by outsiders with uncontacted tribes, for whatever stated justification, puts their survival at risk and violates their right to live as they choose. It must be stopped.

Given that uncontacted tribes cannot be consulted, the question of their self-determination requires special handling by governments, companies and society at large.

The only way to allow them to survive is to protect their lands from all outsiders, so they can live there in the way they choose. Their territories must be formally recognized and mapped out. Their use by oil and gas companies, agribusiness giants, ranchers and others must be strictly prohibited, and invasions by loggers, miners, drug-traffickers, land-grabbers, poachers and others must be prevented.

The protection of uncontacted tribes' land as the only possible answer to the question of self-determination stems from two key factors:

1. Actions speak

Uncontacted tribes choose to be uncontacted, sometimes as a result of traumatic experiences of past contact with non-indigenous society, which decimated their people.

They are fully aware of their surroundings and of the fact that other neighboring peoples exist, and they show clearly and repeatedly that they don't want contact – by leaving crossed spears in the forest, by pointing arrows up at passing planes, by fleeing when outsiders approach, and by intentionally avoiding others. Contacted indigenous people frequently report that their uncontacted neighbors and relatives don't want contact with others, and some, like the indigenous Amazon Guardians, patrol the forest to defend it from invasion so the uncontacted tribes can survive and thrive.

If they want to make contact with others or feel they must do so as a result of the pressure on their land and resources, they can, and sometimes they do. But initiating contact must be their decision alone. Those who enter uncontacted tribes' territories deny them that choice.

2. Land or death

Uncontacted tribes' territories give them everything they need: food, water, shelter, medicines and more. This means that, when their land rights are upheld, they are among the world's most self-sufficient peoples. However, without their land and its resources, they simply cannot survive. And forced contact by outsiders kills them: disease and violence have wiped out whole tribes soon after first contact, and reduced others to just a few survivors. Their right to life is violated if their right to self-determination is denied them. They are the experts on their own survival.

*"We will not allow [forced contact] because it will be another genocide of a people... of indigenous people who don't want contact."*

Olimpio Guajajara, indigenous Amazon Guardian defending the land of the uncontacted Awá tribe in Brazil

While the main threat all uncontacted tribes face is the theft of their land, national politics, laws and other factors mean their plight varies from one country and region to another. Those listed below are not exhaustive:

## Brazil

Forced contact missions were official policy in Brazil for decades last century and resulted in the decimation of countless tribes. This led Brazil's indigenous affairs department, FUNAI, to adopt, in the late 1980s, its policy of "demarcating" and protecting uncontacted tribes' land for their exclusive use (also required by article 231 of the Brazilian constitution) rather than forcing contact upon them. This policy remains in place, but the power of big business, the anti-indigenous agribusiness and evangelical lobbies (which have strong ties to each other) and the genocidal policies of President Jair Bolsonaro have led to alarming increases in deforestation rates in and around uncontacted tribes' territories. Deforestation in uncontacted tribes' territories increased by 113% in 2019<sup>1</sup>. Loggers, miners, ranchers and others are invading at unprecedented levels, and large infrastructure projects including roads and mega-dams continue to cause widespread destruction.

While uncontacted tribes in some areas in the Brazilian Amazon appear to be thriving, others are being attacked and others are on the brink of extinction. The uncontacted tribes most at risk in Brazil include the Kawahiva, the uncontacted Awá, the uncontacted Yanomami, the uncontacted tribes of the Javari Valley, the uncontacted Indians of the Ituna Itatã and Uru Eu Wau Wau indigenous territories, the uncontacted Āwa on the Bananal Island, and uncontacted tribes such as the Piripkura who live in territories "protected" by temporary injunctions rather than by Brazil's full demarcation system.

## Peru

In Peru, Law No. 28736, a law for the protection of uncontacted and recently contacted tribes, states that the government has the duty to protect the lives of uncontacted tribal people by protecting their territories. However, after decades of administrative delay, six of the eleven "indigenous reserves" for uncontacted tribes have still not been legally established and lack any protection. In addition, Law 28736 does not guarantee the complete protection of indigenous reserves, and the government continues to grant licenses for resource exploitation that overlap with the territories on which uncontacted tribes depend for their survival.

Indigenous organizations in Peru, and their allies, are calling for a modification to the law to strengthen its impact. But large oil, gas and logging companies strongly oppose this, and the Peruvian state continues to delay the bureaucratic processes. As a result, the territories are not fully protected and outsiders are invading and bringing with them illegal resource extraction, deforestation, violence and a critically high, and increasing, risk of forced contact.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://g1.globo.com/jornal-nacional/noticia/2020/03/02/aumenta-o-desmatamento-em-terras-indigenas-diz-estudo.ghtml>

## Paraguay

The uncontacted Ayoreo Totobiegosode live in the Paraguayan Chaco region. They are believed to be the only uncontacted tribe in South America outside the Amazon. In 2001, the Paraguayan state recognized their territory as the “Ayoreo Totobiegosode Natural and Cultural Patrimony” (Patrimonio Natural y Cultural Ayoreo Totobiegosode, PNCAT, in Spanish), but this land has not yet been titled under their name and remains in the hands of logging and agribusiness companies.

In 2016, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) ordered the Paraguayan state to urgently proceed with the titling and established precautionary measures prohibiting companies from exploiting the territories within the PNCAT, but the process has been frozen for decades as the state claims to lack resources. Today, the uncontacted Ayoreo are totally fenced in by increasing illegal deforestation and Paraguay has one of the highest deforestation rates in the world. Their recently-contacted relatives continue to fight for their lands and defend the uncontacted Ayoreo’s choice, and right, to continue to live without contact.

## India

The Sentinelese, on India’s Andaman Islands, are the most isolated tribe in the world. They live, without neighbors, on their own island, known to outsiders as North Sentinel. Little is known about them, other than what can be gleaned from a distance. They are thought to number somewhere between 50 and 200. They have repeatedly made it clear by their actions that outsiders are not welcome and that they wish to be left alone. After the 2004 Tsunami a member of the tribe was photographed aiming an arrow at a coastguard helicopter checking for survivors – sending a clear signal to stay away. In November 2018 the Sentinelese once again sent a strong message that they wanted to be left alone. When US missionary John Allen Chau tried to land on their island to convert them to Christianity, after warning him to retreat, they killed him.

The Sentinelese face threats to the resources they rely on from fishermen who poach in the creeks around their island and who also bring the threat of diseases to which the Sentinelese have no immunity. Despite a policy to not to make contact with the tribe, and laws to stop outsiders going to their island, these laws are not properly enforced and the sea around their islands is not sufficiently policed and protected. The Sentinelese are also under threat from calls from some Indian anthropologists and officials who continue to question the government’s no contact policy, despite the very clear messages the Sentinelese have sent that show their determination to remain uncontacted.

## West Papua

In the 1990s, more than 40 uncontacted tribes were identified in West Papua. Although many of these tribes have since had contact, Survival believes that there are others who choose to remain uncontacted. It is almost impossible to obtain accurate information on uncontacted tribes in West Papua. Human rights organisations and journalists are banned from entering, and research possibilities are severely limited. Uncontacted peoples in West Papua are threatened by diseases from irresponsible tourism, military repression, invasion by miners, plantation owners, loggers and others seeking the natural resources of their lands.