

Mercury contamination rampant in Brazil Indigenous group: Study

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A Yanomami Indigenous woman carries her child on her back at a Brazilian Air Force field hospital in the city of Boa Vista, Roraima state, Brazil, in January 2023.

Researchers in the Brazilian Amazon found universal mercury contamination among members of the Yanomami Indigenous group

living in a region awash in illegal gold mining, said a study published Thursday, warning of devastating health impacts.

The study, led by Brazilian public health institute Fiocruz, took hair samples and mouth swabs from 293 Yanomami in nine villages in the upper Mucajai river region in the northern state of Roraima.

The region is among those hit hardest by illegal gold mining in the Yanomami reservation, a territory bigger than Portugal that is home to around 29,000 Indigenous people.

The study, carried out in October 2022, found 100 percent of participants were contaminated with the toxic metal, including 84 percent with levels above the limit recommended by the World Health Organization, two micrograms per gram of hair.

Another 10.8 percent had mercury levels above six micrograms per gram of hair, which requires special medical attention, the authors said.

"This situation of vulnerability exponentially increases the risk of disease for [children](#) who live in the region," especially those under five, lead researcher Paulo Basta said in a statement.

The Yanomami are suffering a devastating health crisis that experts say is driven by an explosion of illegal mining on their land.



Aerial view of the Mucajai river in the Yanomami Indigenous territory.

Indigenous leaders and rights activists accuse wildcat miners of raping and killing Yanomami inhabitants, tearing down the rainforest and triggering a [food crisis](#)—as well as poisoning rivers with the mercury used to separate gold from sediment.

In 2023, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva deployed the army and police in a bid to evict an estimated 20,000 illegal miners from Yanomami territory. But activists say the isolated Indigenous group remains extremely vulnerable.

The study found average mercury consumption three times above

recommended limits, ingested via one of the Yanomami's main food sources, fish.

It found degenerative nerve diseases in about 30 percent of participants—a condition linked to mercury poisoning.

Among children, 55.2 percent showed cognitive deficits, and another 34.5 percent were borderline.

"Mining is the greatest evil we have today in Yanomami land," said Dario Vitorio Kopenawa, vice president of the Hutukara Yanomami Association.

"Our children are being born sick," he said in a statement. "Our people are dying because of [gold mining](#)."

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