



Puyr Tembe, leadership from Brazil's Indigenous People Articulation, left, greets Brazilian President-elect Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva at the COP27 U.N. climate summit Nov. 17, 2022, in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. (AP photo/Peter Dejong)



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After four years of unprecedented levels of deforestation in the Amazon during President Jair Bolsonaro's administration, church movements connected to the environment and the protection of traditional peoples are hopeful that the end of his tenure and the beginning of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government may open a new landscape in Brazil.

The new president gave an important signal regarding his disposition to tackle such problems on Jan. 30 [after he met with the German chancellor Olaf Scholz](#). Lula told the press that he and Scholz discussed possible cooperation on environmental initiatives, and declared that he would not tolerate illegal mining on Yanomami territory anymore.

Lula is set to meet with U.S. President Joe Biden on Feb. 10. While world leaders like Scholz and Biden have been expressing their willingness to collaborate on environmental protection in Brazil, they also represent the ambitions of powerful economic groups that may intensify mining in the nation.

After pictures of malnourished and ill Yanomami people were released a couple of weeks ago, many realized the seriousness of the situation of Indigenous groups — and of their territories — in Brazil after the Bolsonaro administration.

While the former president repeatedly failed to provide food and health care assistance to the Yanomami — and to combat illegal mining in their territory, which analysts say is the cause of their problems — Lula, who took office on Jan. 1, has acted quickly.

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On Jan. 21, he visited the Yanomami territory in the Amazonian state of Roraima and announced urgent measures, like the distribution of food and medicine kits. On Feb. 4, police raids in the region led hundreds of miners to voluntarily begin to leave the area.

The connection between environmental devastation and deaths of traditional peoples has been stressed by church movements over the past years, when deforestation in the Amazon and other biomes has had an unprecedented increase. Now, Catholic activists from different parts of the South American nation are dialoguing with the new administration to present the most urgent measures it should take to address the issues.

"Indeed, we now have a renewed hope. During the Bolsonaro administration, popular movements made a huge effort to stop the ongoing destruction. Now, they can help to build a new process of public policies aiming at environmental protection," affirmed Bishop Evaristo Spengler of Marajó, recently appointed to assume the Diocese of Roraima.



A Yanomami man is pictured in a 2019 photo standing near an illegal gold mine on Indigenous land in the heart of Brazil's Amazon rainforest. (CNS/Reuters/Bruno Kelly)

Spengler, who heads the [Pan-Amazon Ecclesial Network](#) (known by the Portuguese acronym REPAM) in Brazil, emphasized that Lula's appointment of Marina Silva as his minister of environment was one of the first reassuring signs.

"Marina Silva is internationally recognized for her longtime experience in defending the Amazon. We hope that we can have something like a general stop in environmental destruction at this moment — while a new environmental protection plan is developed," he argued.

Church conservationists [denounced on different occasions](#) that Bolsonaro was dismantling the state monitoring and control system and weakening the government's environmental agencies. Such actions, combined with his numerous

speeches incentivizing invaders to operate in the rainforest, led to an [increase of 59.5% in the Amazon's destruction during his tenure](#).

"The devastation has several reasons. It involves the extraction of lumber, the destruction with fire for future occupation with cattle and monocultures, mining, and megaprojects of infrastructure. It all should stop. We need to think about what kind of economic development we want in Brazil," Spengler argued.

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Those problems were further intensified with the total suspension of the land reform program by Bolsonaro and by his reluctance to concede new land grants to traditional peoples.

In Brazil, especially in the Amazon, many territories are owned by the state, which has the autonomy to direct part of them to landless peasants. The federal government also analyzes land requests made by Indigenous groups and *quilombola* communities — descendants of African slaves who fled captivity during colonial and imperial eras in Brazil (1500–1889) — and decides whether or not to grant them the territories they claim.



Then-President Jair Bolsonaro speaks during a ceremony at the presidential palace Jan. 12, 2021, in Brasilia. (CNS/Reuters/Adriano Machado)

Bolsonaro promised during his campaign in 2018 that he would never concede lands to Indigenous groups — and he kept that promise.

The Bishops' Conference's Land Pastoral Commission (known as CPT in Portuguese) emphasized on several occasions that [such groups are key to preserving Brazilian biomes](#), given that their lives depend on the rainforest.

"The new government reinstated the Ministry of Agrarian Development, which had been extinguished by Bolsonaro. That is very positive. But we are still waiting for the Lula administration to present its land reform program," said Isolete Wichinieski, a CPT national coordinator.

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She affirmed that most rural civic organizations know that the new government will not be able to make much progress in 2023 due to budget shortages.

"But at least we now have open doors to dialogue with it. The civic organizations have presented their proposals to them and we hope that something can be done," she added.

According to Wichinieski, at least 400 processes of land reform were frozen during Bolsonaro's tenure.

"And 5,000 *quilombola* communities are still waiting to receive land deeds, which they need in order to be safe in their territories," she described.

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Such segments are also important to combat natural wildfires, given that they usually have their own fire squads and know how to prevent flames from spreading.

"The new government must strengthen such popular fire squads and also establish a system to investigate criminal wildfires," she added.

Bishop Vicente Ferreira, the secretary of the Bishops' Conference's Special Commission on Integral Ecology and Mining, is also hopeful about the new administration, given that members of the group are in touch with the authorities and had the opportunity to discuss with them the consequences of legal and illegal mining projects for the environment and the people in Brazil.



The Uraricoera River is pictured in a file photo during a Brazilian government operation against illegal gold mining on Indigenous land in the heart of the Amazon rainforest. (CNS/Reuters/Bruno Kelly)

"But 'extractivist' projects, like mining endeavors, are currently gaining much support in the world as a whole. We are going through a kind of neocolonialist era. Brazil is seen as an open field for mining by world economic groups," he told EarthBeat.

Ferreira said that the international pressures on Brazil for the concession of mining licenses will be very strong during Lula's presidency. In his previous administrations, Lula had an ambiguous stance on such environmental protection issues, at times opening the doors for initiatives with high environmental impact.

"Now he is learning more and more about integral ecology. He is more mature and knows that he has to be a voice for the ones who have been most affected by neoliberal policies," Ferreira said.

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During his planned meeting with Biden on Feb. 10, "Lula will probably mention the Yanomami, the people who were impacted by mining projects and so on," he added.

"I hope he will talk about environmental issues and not only about the economy," said Ferreira, adding that if he doesn't mention such problems, his supporters formed by environmental movements may pressure him to "feel embarrassed" for leaving environmental concerns out of the conversation.

Pressure against Lula's environmental agenda will likely come from the National Congress of Brazil, whose elected members are mostly conservative and against policies to protect nature.

"Lula is a 'diplomat' and he knows that he will need to negotiate. Without the Congress, he will not be able to rule. But at least the popular movements will be free to demonstrate, something that was much more difficult in the Bolsonaro administration," Ferreira said.

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Combonian Fr. Dario Bossi, a founding member of the Commission on Integral Ecology and Mining, affirmed that it will not be an easy task to deal with the Congress' demands.

"It will be very challenging. Even in the executive [branch] there is no harmony when it comes to such debate. In Congress, there are groups that can easily blackmail the government to abandon an environmental agenda," he told EarthBeat.

In Bossi's opinion, it is up to the church to be "nature's voice and to open the space for the poor to be heard."

In that regard, the Catholic Church has a long way to go, Ferreira said.

"We still need to assume a more prophetic stance on the environment. We need to do our ecological conversion, otherwise we will be very distant from the people's and from the Earth's problems," he said.