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# First Yanomami Covid-19 death raises fears for Brazil's indigenous peoples

*Tom Phillips*

5-6 minutes

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A Yanomami teenager has reportedly died after contracting Covid-19, further fuelling fears over the disease's potential to decimate indigenous communities in the Amazon.

The victim – who health authorities named as 15-year-old Alvanei Xirixana – died on Thursday night after [spending almost a week in intensive care in Boa Vista](#), a Brazilian city near the Yanomami's Portugal-sized reserve.

The Folha de São Paulo newspaper [reported](#) that Xirixana was from Rehebe, a village along the Uraricoera River which [wildcat goldminers use to illegally access the mineral-rich territory](#).

The website Amazônia Real [said](#) the village's 70 or so members had been isolated, as well as the victim's parents, five health workers and a local pilot.

It was not clear how or where the teenager, who reportedly lived outside the reserve, had become infected, although

reports have suggested Yanomami leaders suspect illegal gold prospectors could be responsible for bringing coronavirus into their 26,000-strong community.

The teenager's death has rekindled painful memories for the Yanomami as well as fears over the coronavirus's potential to wreak havoc on indigenous communities across South America.

Carlo Zaquini, an Italian missionary who has worked with the Yanomami in Brazil for more than half a century, watched Yanomami communities brought to their knees during the 1970s and 1980s by epidemics caused by an influx of roadbuilders and gold miners.

"It was like driving a bulldozer into a glass factory. Everything was shattered. It was one epidemic after another," Zaquini, 82, remembered of that period.

"In some of the villages I knew measles killed 50% of the population. If Covid does the same thing it would be a massacre," he added.

Brazilian health authorities have so far detected 24 suspected coronavirus cases among the country's 850,000-strong indigenous population, according to [the official news agency](#), Agência Brasil.

"Indigenous people have lived with epidemics brought by the white man since the 16th century," columnist Bernardo Mello Franco [wrote](#) in Brazil's O Globo newspaper this week. "Now, with the arrival of coronavirus, the threat is back."

Up to 20,000 illegal goldminers called *garimpeiros* are believed to be working in the area inhabited by the Yanomami along Brazil's border with Venezuela.

Sofia Mendonça, a Brazilian public health physician who works with indigenous communities, said their eviction was essential if indigenous lives were to be saved.

"If we don't get these people out of the [indigenous] areas the chance of contagion is much greater," Mendonça warned.

Zaquini said he hoped health authorities were better prepared to protect the Yanomami than during past epidemics, with dozens of health posts now existing within their reserve.

"There are some things in the past that left me traumatized and I hope these things don't repeat themselves," he said. "But I view the current situation with real, real pessimism."

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