



Brazil: missionaries 'turning tribes against coronavirus vaccine'

Health workers were reportedly attacked with bows and arrows after visiting an indigenous community in Amazonas

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Reuters in Brasília

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Medical teams working to immunise Brazil's remote indigenous villages against the coronavirus have encountered fierce resistance in some communities where evangelical missionaries are stoking fears of the vaccine, say tribal leaders and advocates.

On the São Francisco reservation in the state of Amazonas, Jamamadi villagers sent health workers packing with bows and arrows when they visited by helicopter this month, said Claudemir da Silva, an Apurinã leader representing indigenous communities on the Purus river, a tributary of the Amazon.

“It’s not happening in all villages, just in those that have missionaries or evangelical chapels where pastors are convincing the people not to receive the vaccine, that they will turn into an alligator and other crazy ideas,” he said by phone.

That has added to fears that Covid-19 could roar through Brazil’s more than 800,000 indigenous people, whose communal living and often precarious healthcare make them a priority in the national immunisation program.

Tribal leaders blame Brazil’s far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, and some of his avid supporters in the evangelical community for stoking scepticism about coronavirus vaccines, despite a national death toll that lags behind only the United States.

“Religious fundamentalists and evangelical missionaries are preaching against the vaccine,” said Dinamam Tuxá, a leader of APIB, Brazil’s largest indigenous organisation.

The Association of Brazilian Anthropologists denounced unspecified religious groups in a statement on Tuesday for spreading false conspiracy theories to “sabotage” the vaccination of indigenous people.

Many pastors of Brazil’s urban evangelical megachurches are urging followers to get vaccinated, but they say missionaries in remote territories have not received the message.

“Unfortunately, some pastors who lack wisdom are spreading misinformation to our indigenous brethren,” said Pastor Mario Jorge Conceição of the Assembly of God Traditional church in Manaus, the capital of Amazonas state.

The government’s indigenous health agency, Sesai, told Reuters in a statement that it was working to raise awareness of the importance of coronavirus immunisation.

Bolsonaro has played down the severity of the virus and refused to take a vaccine himself. He has aimed special derision at the country’s most widely available vaccine, made by China’s Sinovac Biotech, citing doubts about its origins.

At an event in December, the president ridiculed Pfizer because he said the company had refused to assume liability for collateral effects in talks with his government. “If you take the vaccine and turn into an alligator, it’s your problem. If you turn into Superman or women grow beards, I have nothing to do with that,” Bolsonaro said sarcastically.

Pfizer has said it proposed standard contractual guarantees to the Brazilian government that other countries accepted before using its vaccine.

Social media has fanned false rumours about the coronavirus vaccines even in remote corners of Brazil.

For instance, 56-year-old tribal chief Fernando Katukina, of the Nôke Kôï people near the Peru border, died on 1 February of cardiac arrest related to diabetes and congestive heart failure. Word spread rapidly on social media and radio that the Covid-19 vaccine he received in January had caused his death.

The Butantan biomedical centre, which is producing and distributing the Sinovac vaccine, scrambled to convince indigenous people that was not the case.

“The social media messages saying that Fernando Katukina died after taking a Covid-19 vaccine are fake news,” Butantan wrote in a tweet.

Covid-19 has killed at least 957 indigenous people, according to APIB, out of some 48,071 confirmed infections among half of Brazil’s 300 native ethnic groups. The numbers could be much higher, because Sesai only monitors indigenous people living on reservations.

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