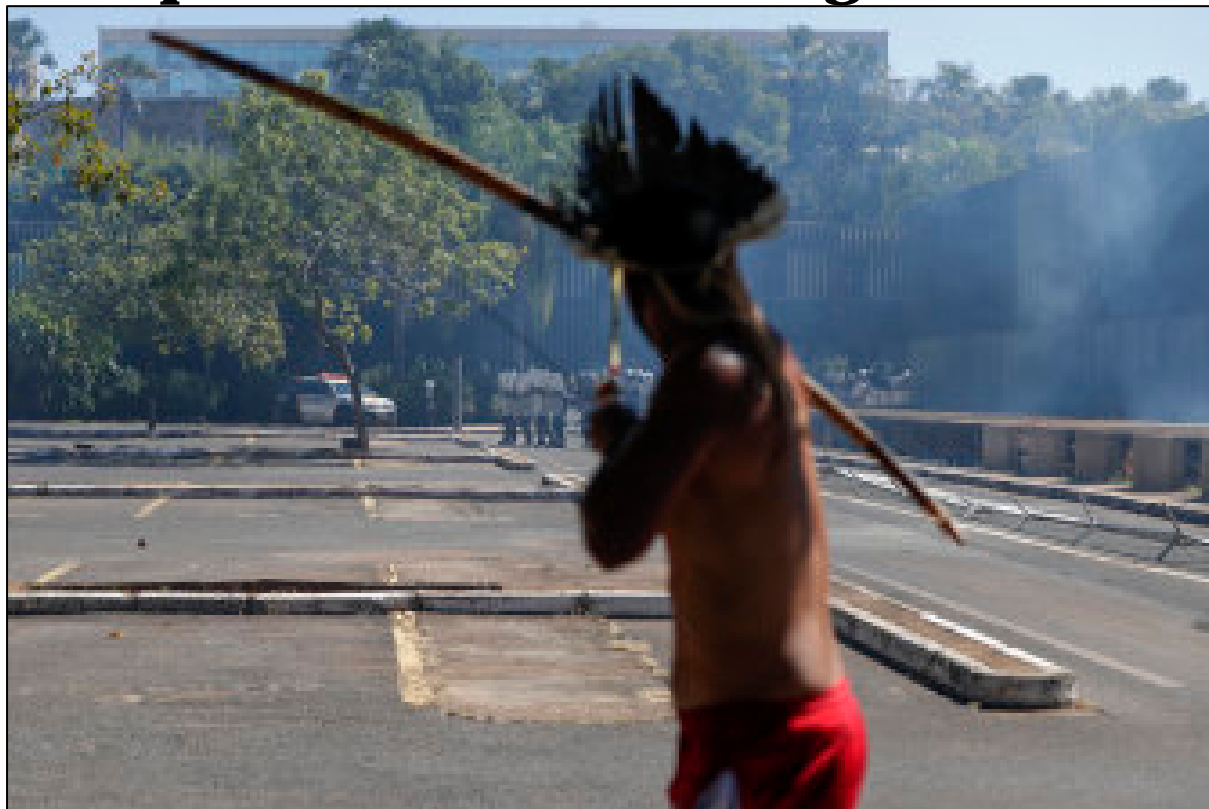


Bolsonaro's 'Indian brothers' take to capital to claim land rights



An Indigenous protester aims his bow an arrow at police outside Congress in Brasilia, Brazil.

By David Biller and Tatiana Pollastri
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Brasilia: Police clashes and tear gas did not prevent hundreds of Indigenous people gathered outside Brazil's Congress to push for rejection of a proposed law that could loosen protections for their lands.

Indigenous groups have been staging protests for days in the capital Brasilia. Dressed in traditional clothes and carrying bows, they marched to Congress, where they sang and danced. A group of women gave roses to police officers standing guard. The prior day, police used tear gas to disperse the protesters, who shot arrows; one pierced an officer's leg.

The bill before the lower house's Constitution and Justice Committee aims to require Indigenous people seeking full protection of their territories to have been occupying the land in 1988, the year the country's constitution was signed after the nation's return to democracy. The constitution says Indigenous territories belong to the state and Indigenous people have customary land tenure which is not subject to negotiation.

The committee approved the bill on Thursday AEST, paving the way for it to proceed to the floor for a vote.

Indigenous rights activists say the cut-off date ignores the fact many had been forcibly expelled from their ancestral lands, particularly during the military dictatorship that preceded the constitution, or may not have formal means to prove possession.



Indigenous people march past the Brasilia Cathedral. Activists travelled to the capital to press for an end to illegal mining and logging on their land and oppose a bill they say would limit recognition of tribal lands.

There are currently 237 such requests for full protection of territories, most small and located outside the Amazon rainforest in the country's north, according to Juliana Batista, a lawyer at the non-profit Socioenvironmental Institute.

“It is a big conflict because they're in areas within contexts of real estate speculation, cities, and very much pressured by economic interests,” Batista said. “If they can't prove they were in possession, they could lose their lands.”

The bill's backers argue it would provide legal certainty to agricultural producers, a key constituency of far-right President Jair Bolsonaro. He has said Indigenous people control far too much territory relative to their population – their territories cover 14 per cent of Brazil, most in the Amazon – and he has been outspoken about his desire to promote development. The last census in 2010 numbered the people identifying as Indigenous at less than 1 million. It may not have included millions who have Indigenous heritage but do not identify it as their race.



Indigenous protesters run from police outside Congress in Brasilia, Brazil, after being barred from entering.

“Brazil has enormous potential within that 14 per cent, that enormous area of our Indigenous brothers,” he said in a broadcast on social media in April, while highlighting the country’s multitude of agricultural crops.

“We want to integrate the Indian into society,” he added. “The Indian wants to integrate into society, and we won’t do anything beyond what our Indian brothers want to do.”

Indigenous demonstrators in Brasilia strove to show they were indeed opposed to any changes that could strip them of their rights.

The bill also would allow the government to appropriate so-called Indigenous reserves demarcated prior to 1988 if the groups’ cultural features have changed. That could potentially apply to more than 60 areas totalling roughly 400,000 hectares, which are home to around 70,000 people, according to the institute.

“The bill attacks lands already approved and demarcated and opens space for illegal mining and deforestation if it’s approved,” Kretã Kaingang, an Indigenous leader from Brazil’s southern region, said. “It attacks all of our rights.”

Indigenous demonstrators earlier circled around a giant speaker to listen to the congressional committee's proceedings. They said clashes this week began when they tried to move out of the blasting sun and into a shaded area.



Xavante Indigenous leader Megaron stands outside Congress during a protest in Brasilia, Brazil. President Jair Bolsonaro says his "Indigenous brothers" want to be integrated into white society.

"For decades we have faced ... miners' invasions, violence, leaders being killed," said Dinamã Tuxá, an Indigenous leader from north-eastern Bahia state. "And then we arrive to denounce precisely what is going on inside our territories and we face the same situation."

The country's Supreme Court in the past has ruled against efforts to open Indigenous territories to business interests, ruling the reserves were off limits to commercial development.

AP