

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

July 19, 2022

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

We followed news of the disappearance of Bruno Pereira, an accomplished and respected Brazilian Indigenous rights expert and Dom Phillips, a beloved British journalist who reported in Brazil for 15 years, with grave concern. Now that their killers have confessed and their bodies have been found, we express our deepest condolences to their loved ones and join the global outcry for justice to be served in their case.

These two are just the highest profile current cases of innumerable people who have been threatened and killed for their defense of the Amazon rainforest. The list of known cases - Chico Mendes (1988), Sister Dorothy Stang (2005), Maxciel Pereira (2019) and Paulo Paulino Guajajara (2019) - is certainly only a small fraction of the many cases that go undocumented. According to Global Witness, which tracks killings of environmental defenders, “Brazil is one of the deadliest countries in the world for land and environmental defenders, many of them from indigenous communities.” Of the 1540 environmental defender killings documented by Global Witness between 2012 and 2020, 317 occurred in Brazil. That represents more than one out of every five such killings across the world.¹ And the killings are only the tip of the iceberg of violence that is committed daily against land and environment defenders.

This human-level tragedy is a symptom of a broader assault on the Amazon rainforest, which is pushing the vast ecosystem to an ecological tipping point. As reported in a broad range of international press outlets like the New York Times² and the Washington Post³, the Amazon basin is reaching a level of deforestation that could tip the entire ecosystem into an irreversible decline. The climate implications of such a scenario are horrifying. While other governments are also responsible for what happens, some 60% of the Amazon is within Brazil’s borders and subject to Bolsonaro’s current assault. The situation only continues to deteriorate.⁴

The collective and individual threats against Indigenous peoples, Quilombola communities and other ‘guardians of the forest’ have reached disastrous proportions under the regime of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro.⁵ Other worsening environmental indicators are the increasing figures related to deforestation and fires, not only in the Amazon but also in other key ecosystems like the Cerrado and the Pantanal wetlands.

As you may be aware, Bruno Pereira worked for years to support Indigenous peoples as they countered these threats, including through the creation of local Indigenous surveillance teams - and Dom Phillips was documenting those efforts as he wrote the to-be-titled book “How to Save the Amazon.” Promoting Indigenous peoples’ collective and individual rights is a central strategy for protecting the Amazon, as innumerable studies have shown that properly recognized and protected Indigenous territories are an effective bulwark against deforestation and biodiversity loss. “Between 2005 and 2012, deforestation rates were 17 times lower in Indigenous territories than in unprotected areas of the Amazon; in conservation units and lands managed by Quilombolas, the descendants of runaway Afro-Brazilian slaves, deforestation rates were about six times lower than in unprotected areas.”⁶

¹ <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/last-line-defence/>

² [Amazon Rainforest May Be Approaching a Critical Tipping Point, Study Finds - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](#)

³ [Amazon rainforest is hurtling toward a ‘tipping point,’ satellites show - The Washington Post](#)

⁴ [Brazil's Amazon deforestation hits April record, nearly double previous peak | Reuters](#)

⁵ [How Brazil’s government is clearing the way for Amazon deforestation \(fastcompany.com\)](#)

⁶ [In Brazilian Amazon, Indigenous lands stop deforestation and boost recovery \(mongabay.com\)](#)

A key concern in the Javari, on which Bruno worked for many years, is the protection of “uncontacted” Indigenous peoples, groups that live in extreme isolation in the most remote sections of the Amazon rainforest. and that have little or no contact with outsiders. They are also some of the most vulnerable peoples on the planet, given their susceptibility to common diseases. They are under increasing threat from organized crime mafias that are invading the Javari region and carrying out illegal resource extraction within those territories.

Bruno supported the Indigenous patrols and documented their first expedition through a 56-page report,⁷ in which illegal hunting and fishing activities were detailed. This work put him in the crosshairs of those mafias, and he received increasing threats in addition to Indigenous leaders like Beto Marubo of UNIVAJA. These collective and individual threats were reported to the Brazilian authorities, with no response prior to the disappearance of Dom and Bruno.


Impunity is the watchword for killings in the Brazilian Amazon, and for the future of the Amazon this case cannot just fade into memory. We appreciate that State Department spokesperson Ned Price issued a statement⁸ on June 17th calling for accountability and justice. Additionally, we encourage that the Biden Administration take the following steps:


- Publicly call for prosecutions of all those involved in this crime and an impartial, exhaustive investigation into the circumstances of the killing – focusing not just on the assailants, but also on any other relevant individuals and organizations.
- Meet with representatives of local indigenous peoples, to hear their concerns and request for support;
- Commit to a long-term follow-up on the security situation of Indigenous peoples of the Javari region, and support efforts for collective protection of their territories such as the Indigenous patrols;
- Send a high-level delegation to Brazil to meet with representatives of local indigenous peoples and formulate a U.S. policy agenda for addressing their concerns: and
- Coordinate closely with other governments, international experts, and international organizations (including relevant United Nations human rights bodies and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights) to monitor and respond to the ongoing situation.


Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,


Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress


Susan Wild
Member of Congress


Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress


Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.
Member of Congress

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-journalist-indigenous-insight-idCAKBN20006L>

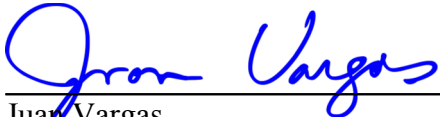
⁸ <https://twitter.com/StateDeptSpox/status/1537865727230853125>



Jesus G. "Chuy" Garcia
Member of Congress



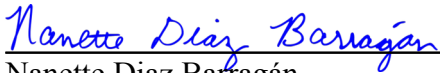
Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



Juan Vargas
Member of Congress



James P. McGovern
Member of Congress



Nanette Diaz Barragan
Member of Congress



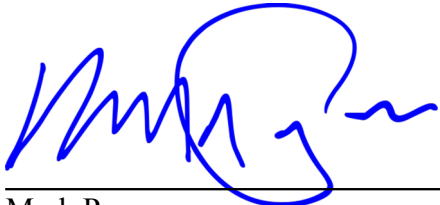
Steve Cohen
Member of Congress



Barbara Lee
Member of Congress



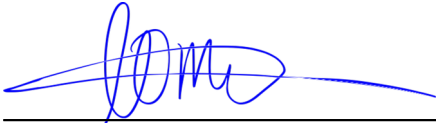
Adriano Espaillat
Member of Congress




Mark Pocan
Member of Congress



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress



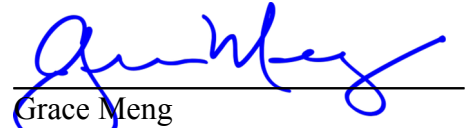
Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress



David J. Trone
Member of Congress



Jared Huffman
Member of Congress



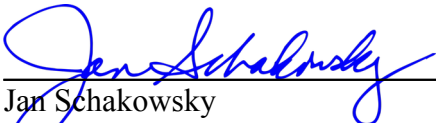
Grace Meng
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Peter Welch
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