

Opinion - Journalist safety

# Indigenous people - The disappearance of journalist Dom Phillips in Brazil should leave you incandescent with rage

Saturday 11 June 2022, by [JORDAN Lucy](#) (Date first published: 9 June 2022).

## Jair Bolsonaro's dog-whistle politics is risking the lives of Indigenous people and the reporters who tell their stories

It's now more than four days since veteran [Brazil](#) correspondent Dom Phillips and Indigenous expert Bruno Araújo Pereira disappeared in the Javari Valley, a remote part of the western Amazon thought to have the world's highest concentration of uncontacted people.

Pereira, a longtime defender of Indigenous rights who previously worked for Funai, Brazil's government Indigenous rights agency, had reportedly received threats for his work monitoring illegal activities in the region.

Phillips and Pereira were last seen early on Sunday while travelling in a boat on the Itaquai river in the northern Brazilian state of Amazonas, near the border with Peru. Itaquai is a remote, lawless, and strategically important area for illegal trafficking, fishing and mining. It is home to a [growing presence](#) of armed gangs. Diplomats, NGOs and media organisations are now [calling on the Brazilian government](#) to rapidly expand and accelerate their search-and-rescue mission.

The official response has been woefully inadequate. The army initially said that it would only launch a rescue mission once given orders from a higher command, wasting precious hours immediately after the pair disappeared. It took [days](#) to deploy a helicopter to the region.

Indigenous groups that have been searching on the ground since Sunday released a [statement](#) saying they had repeatedly called on multiple federal agencies for help. Yet with the exception of six military police officers and a team from Funai, federal agencies and armed forces have been "absent from the effort", they said. As the Indigenous leader Sônia Guajajara put it when she recently asked [US climate envoy John Kerry](#) to intervene personally: "The search is so slow, and it is pitiful that we continue to live in a situation where there is no security."

Many of us reporters here in Brazil know Phillips personally. He's been here for 15 years, a dogged, sharp-eyed journalist and an incredibly kind man. He is never too busy to help out a fellow reporter, a generosity that shapes his work: he covers under-reported stories because he cares deeply about giving a voice to Brazil's marginalised groups. He takes on risky assignments because he believes the stories he tells matter that much. As his wife, [Alessandra, puts it](#), "I want you to know that Dom Phillips, my husband, loves Brazil and he loves the Amazon. He could have chosen to live anywhere in the world but he chose here."

Of course, we don't yet know exactly what has happened. But for those of us who have been

following Brazil's grim political reality for the past three years, we're not just sad, worried and fearful. We're also incandescent with rage. As time passes, foul play becomes an even more likely explanation. This is it, we want to scream. This is the logical consequence of three years of encouraging violence against Indigenous people and journalists.

Under president Jair Bolsonaro, attacks on the press have increased. He peppers his speeches with anti-Indigenous, anti-conservation dog whistles. Bolsonaro has consistently presented environmental protections and Indigenous rights as mere impediments to economic development; nuisances that stand in the way of a more muscular, industrial Brazil. Many appear to have taken him at his word. Invasions and violence against Indigenous people have increased and deforestation has soared under his presidency. In 2019, farmers in Pará [set the forest on fire](#) to show Bolsonaro they got the message and approved of it.

And it hasn't only been words. The Bolsonaro administration has made multiple attempts to bolster these grudges in law. Several bills are being processed in Brazil's congress that, directly or indirectly, threaten Brazilian Indigenous lands, either by opening them up to economic interests such as mining or by curtailing Indigenous people's rights to their land in the first place. The message this has sent has been clearly received: do what you like to Indigenous people because there will be no repercussions. Invade their land, cut down their trees, contaminate their rivers. Even [kill them](#), if that's what it takes.

How do we continue asking other reporters to take on these risks? What message does it send when people such as Phillips and Pereira vanish, only to be met with a pitiful official response? There is no risk assessment in the world that can mitigate against three years of dangerous propaganda coming from the very top of government.

Bolsonaro's response, when asked about the disappearance, was callous and dismissive. He appeared to blame Phillips and Pereira. [They shouldn't have been there](#), he said, on an "adventure". Anything could happen. But as many of the men's colleagues have pointed out on social media, reporting in the field isn't an adventure. Advocating for Indigenous rights isn't an adventure. It's a public service. It's a moral imperative. One that this government has made all the more necessary, and all the more dangerous. And that's why advocates and reporters - brave, kind people such as Phillips and Pereira - will keep on taking these risks. And why we must keep holding the government to account.

**Lucy Jordan**

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**P.S.**

- The Guardian. Thu 9 Jun 2022 13.43 BST:  
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