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Vanderlecia Ortega dos Santos embraces her niece outside their home in Manaus, Brazil, May 7, 2020. Church leaders sent a strong message of support to an unprecedented virtual assembly of more than 3,000 indigenous leaders, small farmers, environmental campaigners and women in the Amazon region affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Bruno Kelly)

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Church leaders sent a strong message of support to an unprecedented virtual assembly of more than 3,000 indigenous leaders, small farmers, environmental campaigners and women from the nine countries of the Amazon region seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The church is the ally of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, and we will live and die with you, if necessary," Cardinal Pedro Barreto of Huancayo, Peru, vice president of the Pan-Amazonian Church Network, told participants. Speaking from Huancayo via Zoom, the cardinal reminded the participants that the assembly had the support of Pope Francis and the whole church.

"Rome has been Amazonified and the Amazon region is no longer invisible," the cardinal said, referring to the October 2019 Synod of Bishops for the Amazon held in the Vatican, which brought together church and lay representatives from all nine countries. The synod process produced an apostolic exhortation and a recently created Amazonian ecclesial conference, part of the Latin American bishops' conference.

The virtual assembly July 18-19 replaced the physical meeting of the Pan-Amazon Social Forum, which was to be held in Mocoa, Colombia, and has been postponed several times due to the pandemic. The Pan-Amazonian Church Network, or REPAM, participated in the organization of the virtual gathering, along with the Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin.

For two days, representatives of 540 groups from Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, Suriname, Guyana and French Guyana presented the situation in their countries. Some provided videos. Many of the grassroots members clearly were not accustomed to Zoom technology, with some forgetting to unmute their

microphones or start their videos. Sometimes, the connections were bad, and sound was poor.

But the message from the groups could be summed up in the words of indigenous leader Luz Mery Panche of San Vicente, Caqueta, Colombia: "The pandemic is telling us that the model imposed upon us has failed. As humanity, we must stop and think if we want to continue to exist on this planet, or if we want to destroy it. This is not a fight between left and right — it is a struggle for defense of territory and for life."

The assembly's convocation document set out the ills that are destroying the Amazon and its peoples: ecocide, as fragile ecosystems are destroyed by legal mining projects and environmentally destructive illegal artisanal mining; the destruction of the rainforest to produce monocultures and genetically modified crops and raise cattle for export abroad; massive forest fires and projects such as highways and hydroelectric projects. It also denounced the ethnocide and genocide of the region's indigenous peoples, who are uprooted from their environmentally sustainable way of life by such projects on their lands.

"Our current vulnerability to the pandemic reveals and uncovers all situations of exclusion, inequality and injustice in the Amazon region," said Mauricio Lopez, secretary-general of REPAM. Lopez said there are currently some 600,000 people infected by COVID-19 in the region, and around 20,000 have died. 170 different indigenous peoples have been affected by the pandemic.



Demonstrators hold a cross during a July 19, 2020, protest in Brasilia, Brazil, concerning governmental action during the coronavirus pandemic. Church leaders sent a strong message of support to an unprecedented virtual assembly of more than 3,000 indigenous leaders, small farmers, environmental campaigners and women in the Amazon region affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Adriano Machado)

In his opening address to the assembly, Barreto referred to the Amazon as the lungs of the planet. He drew a parallel between the attack of the coronavirus on the lungs of those infected and the ongoing attack on the lungs of the planet.

"The virus gets into our lungs and suffocates and kills us. In the history of humanity, the virus of greed and extractivism and a lack of respect for human beings has corroded the Amazon and nature and destroyed by genocide the Amazon culture and original peoples," he said.

But, the cardinal added, the struggle of the people of the Amazon region brings hope to humanity.

"Life is much stronger than the virus," the cardinal said.

Participants in the virtual assembly gave presentations from each country detailing how the pandemic has affected them.

"The government is taking advantage of the pandemic to try to destroy the forest to produce meat to export to China and illegally introduce GM seeds to our territories to produce sugar cane, corn, wheat, cotton and soy," said Bolivian consumer rights activist Rita Saavedra. "If successful, this plan would convert Bolivia into the country with the greatest number of GM crops after Brazil."

In Ecuador, the lockdown has been used by entrepreneurs to further encroach on Amazon territories that are officially protected.

"As the government repeated the official slogan, 'Stay Home,' loggers have been out, with the support of the government, cutting down the forest," said a representative of an Ecuadorian environmental coalition. The coalition denounced three oil spills that occurred April 7 in the Napo region, affecting 27,000 members of indigenous communities and 120,000 others. A new road was built leading to the Yasuni National Park, approaching indigenous tribes who still have had no contact with the outside world.

The Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Rainforest denounced the 10,000 infections and 300 indigenous deaths in the Peruvian Amazon as "ethnocide by a failure of public health" and called on the World Health Organization to send a mission to provide treatment and manage the spread of the virus. The organization recommended that the government put on hold extractive projects, which it said are further spreading COVID-19, and described as "absurd" the use of consultations by Zoom to obtain communities' consent — a legal prerequisite — for mega extractive projects on their territories.

Cristina Hernaiz of the Bolivian environmental organization Rios de Pie said her organization sees two pandemics — one of COVID-19 and the other the damaging proliferation of extractive projects on indigenous territories. She echoed the call of the U.S. movement for racial justice: "We can't breathe."

Julio Lopez of the National Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Colombia called on the church to work with the organizations of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon and to remember that the region is more than trees and oxygen.

"Everyone who wants to work to protect the Amazon should start by working with us, the original inhabitants of the region. We have the wisdom of harmony between nature and humanity to offer to the world," he said.

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