News
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Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami shaman, listens to reporters' questions during a press conference after his meeting with Pope Francis at the Vatican, Wednesday, April 10, 2024. Kopenawa, a Yanomami shaman, said he came to the Vatican at Francis’ invitation to brief him on the plight of the Yanomami and the Amazon, where deforestation surged to a 15-year high during the previous administration of far-right President Jair Bolsonaro. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

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Vatican City — April 11, 2024
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Pope Francis met Wednesday with a leader of Brazil's Yanomami people, who asked for papal backing for President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva 's efforts to reverse decades of exploitation of the Amazon and better protect its Indigenous peoples.

Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami shaman, said he came to the Vatican at Francis' invitation to brief him on the plight of the Yanomami and the Amazon, where deforestation surged to a 15-year high during the previous administration of far-right President Jair Bolsonaro. The Yanomami Indigenous Territory, Brazil's largest, was ravaged by thousands of illegal gold miners spurred on by Bolsonaro. They felled trees and poisoned waterways with mercury.

Kopenawa, who wore a traditional feathered headdress and beads around his neck, told reporters afterward he gave Francis a letter laying out the concerns of the Yanomami. He said he asked Francis to support Lula to try to fix the previous government's "error" and that Francis said he would speak with him.

"I'm not going to say they will fix it, I'm not going to say they will solve it. To ruin things it is easy, to fix things it is difficult. But they are trying," Kopenawa said in Portuguese.

"I am a man of our forest who looks after our planet Earth, I am waiting for the international community to fight, I am waiting for the international community that has money, to do it, to stop the destruction of our planet Earth which is happening now."

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The Amazon rainforest, covering an area twice the size of India, is a crucial buffer against climate change. Studies have shown that Indigenous-controlled forests are the best-preserved in the Brazilian Amazon.

But Bolsonaro made good on his pledge to not demarcate a single additional inch of Indigenous territory during his tenure, and defanged environmental enforcement agencies. Deforestation surged to a 15-year high on his watch.

Lula took office and swiftly declared a public health emergency in Yanomami lands due to the effects of illegal mining and began working to expel the miners. He also empowered environmental agencies to crack down on illegal logging. In January, government satellite data showed that deforestation had fallen by half in the first year of Lula's term.

Government officials have said that areas with illegal mining inside Yanomami territory have dropped 85% and health has improved. But after the initial success, prosecutors, law enforcement and employees of federal environmental agencies say illegal miners are returning.



Davi Kopenawa, a Yanomami shaman, listens to reporters' questions during a press conference after his meeting with Pope Francis at the Vatican, Wednesday, April 10, 2024. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)

"One person alone cannot solve everything. That is why I asked for support," Kopenawa said. "I asked the pope to support him, to reinforce the work. To defend the people."

History's first Latin American pope has made caring for the environment, especially the Amazon, a hallmark of his papacy. Francis' 2015 encyclical Laudato Si' lashed out at the unbridled exploitation of the Amazon, accusing wealthy interests of turning Earth into "an immense pile of filth."

In 2019, the Argentine Jesuit convened a special meeting of bishops, or synod, specifically on the Amazon to better understand how the Catholic Church can better minister to its peoples and protect them.

The Vatican didn't provide an official read-out of the meeting, in keeping with protocol. But in a sign of unofficial support, it did organize an informal media briefing with Kopenawa in the lobby of the Vatican Radio headquarters after the audience.