Caught through the lens of a shaking camera hidden in the bushes, a bronze-bodied man is calmly looking at his spear, probably planning a hunt in the forest. Suddenly, as he and his hunting partner become aware of being watched, they turn nervous and quickly jump behind the trees and vanish.

The men belong to the Awa people, one of more than 100 uncontacted tribes in the Brazilian rainforest. Having lost many of their people to encroaching loggers and murderous machines, the tribe is fighting for its survival. “We hope this film will bring a positive outcome and has an international repercussion with a focus on protecting a people, a forest, a nation, a land and a story,” says Flay Guajajara, an indigenous filmmaker who shot the video while traversing the woods near his village in the Amazon last August.

Mr. Guajajara’s video, released last week, is now part of a documentary that captures the fear, isolation and resistance of many Amazonian tribes living in the world’s biggest and richest ecosystem for thousands of years. “We were not allowed to shoot but we know the importance of using this Awa image. If we don’t show it to the world, they will end up being murdered by the loggers. There is a need to show that they exist and their life is at risk,” says Mr. Guajajara, whose film is being screened at an ongoing film festival in Sao Paulo.

With armed loggers and miners on their trail, the Awa are at such a risk of being hunted, says the filmmaker, that they teach their children not to cry — and reveal their location. “They live in constant fear. They are now hiding deeper in the forest to save themselves.”

Unprecedented attack

It’s not just the Awa, the entire world needs the Amazon, the world’s largest rainforest, to survive and fight global warming. Called the “lungs of the planet” for its role in sucking carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere and adding fresh oxygen to it, this green cover which spreads over several South American countries — 60% of it in Brazil — is crucial for sustaining the human civilisation.

But with Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro slashing environmental regulations and opening the region for farming and mining, the country’s portion of rainforest faces an unprecedented attack on its flora, fauna and tribes. In just six months of the Bolsonaro presidency, the deforestation rate has spiked up dangerously. According to data released by Brazil’s National Space Research Institute (INPE), deforestation in the tropical rainforest soared more than 88% in June compared with the same month a year ago. The rainforest lost 739 sq km in just 31 days, which is equivalent to two football fields every minute, according to the INPE data.

But the alarming figures failed to have any impact on Mr. Bolsonaro, who has called his own government’s satellite monitoring data “a lie”. The President has also snubbed the European governments, which have been pressuring Brazil to protect the forests. “You have to understand that the Amazon is Brazil’s, not yours,” Mr. Bolsonaro said last week, while talking to a group of foreign journalists.

But Mr. Bolsonaro and most western firms and investors, particularly in the resource sector, are on the same page when it comes to exploiting the Amazon for mining and money. “It could be a good time to be a mining investor in Brazil,” Anna Prusa, a former U.S. State Department official who now researches Brazil at the Wilson Center, said recently, talking about business opportunities in the country. “Bolsonaro has said pretty publicly he would like fewer restrictions...”

Mr. Bolsonaro’s policies are music to the ears of mining investors who hope to make millions by destroying the Amazon. But the indigenous people, who will undoubtedly bear the brunt of this development, are also getting ready to fight for their turf.

Several Guajajaras, a tribe the filmmaker Flay belongs to, have formed a group called the “Guardians of the Forest”, which tries to defend territories threatened by encroachers. A few dozen of them are trying to protect the Awa. As his film is shown in the country’s biggest city, Mr. Flay hopes to get a few more “Guardians” who can help them in “saving a people, a history – and a planet”. 

SAO PAULO

The ‘lungs of the planet’ are under attack

The Amazon rainforest in Brazil lost 739 sq km in just 31 days, which is equivalent to two football fields every minute, according to govt. data

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Shobhan Saxena is a journalist based in Sao Paulo.