

---

## Journey to South America's Tres Fronteras in the Amazon region, where the coronavirus is taking a heavy toll on indigenous peoples

The coronavirus is inexorably and relentlessly spreading into the depths of the Amazon rainforest, affecting the extremely vulnerable indigenous peoples, without making concessions, in terms of infection and victims. According to figures reported in the daily chart drawn up by REPAM (Pan-American Church Network) and COICA (Coordination of indigenous organizations in the Amazon) as of May 21 there were 92,870 infected and 5,346 dead. *The Covid-19 emergency caused a tragedy not only in the most affected cities of South America, like Manaus and Belém in Brazil, or Iquitos in Peru, but also in the heart of the rainforest.* Such is the case of the so-called *Tres Fronteras*, the tri-border area where the borders of Colombia meet those of Brazil and Peru, along the Amazon River. An area of trade and commerce, usually dirty, where borders are only virtual, as is the case of Leticia, the extreme strip of Colombia that has become a tourist destination in recent years, and Tabatinga, the Brazilian capital of Alto Solimões. SIR made a virtual travel to the *Tres Fronteras* to report on the situation of the pandemic in this part of the Pan-Amazon region, where the virus spread through the great river or air travel, from Manaus and Iquitos. **Brazil, peak of infections even among the indigenous people.** Our journey starts from Tabatinga, with the bishop of Alto Solimões, **dom Adolfo Zon Pereira**, a Spanish Xaverian missionary Father. For days the bishop has been examining and analyzing the data of the seven municipalities of his immense diocese, as vast as Northern Italy but inhabited only by 220,000 people. Impressive are not so much the absolute numbers (2,130 positives and 93 deaths, according to data as of 21 May), but the percentages in relation to the population, with a rate of positive cases of 0.97% of the overall population (almost three times that of Italy). Notably, few swabs have been carried out so far with difficult communication between villages, thus the situation on the ground could be far worse. The bishop said: "Although the mayors have taken social distancing measures already on 19 March and the borders have been closed, the virus is spreading fast. Initially the directives were not taken seriously. *I have been urging people and our priests, every day, to be careful and to stay at home, there is no other treatment.* Two priests were infected with the virus and luckily they overcame it. But the death toll is increasing and the Town Council had to create a new cemetery, on property offered by our diocese." The greatest concern is for the indigenous people: *"The largest number of infections and of coronavirus deaths among the indigenous people occurred in our territory", amounting to approximately 60% out of 600 infected, with 110 deceased.* The Tikuna people represent the largest ethnic group in the territory. "Covid-19 has not yet spread across the territories inhabited by the Javari people", the bishop added. Economic forecasts are equally alarming: "This is a remote corner of the world, we are receiving limited aid, and we compensate through mutual solidarity. Fortunately, after a phone call from the nuncio, we received funds made available by the Pope himself." The bishop is being helped in his charitable work for the local population by **Verónica Rubí**, a lay Marist missionary from Argentina, in charge of the diocese's social ministry: *"Social isolation is necessary, but it's driving families to starvation, this area lives on a subsistence economy."* "Hunger cannot wait" is the name of the campaign, linked to the campaign promoted by Caritas Brazil: "We asked for monetary donations along with foodstuffs and basic necessities. People's generosity exceeded our expectations, we distributed 350 food parcels. Tabatinga is marked by widespread poverty, many homes have neither gas nor electricity." The situation was already problematic before the outbreak of Covid-19: "There is no work," the missionary said, "population are in informal economy, transport to the city is difficult and expensive. Borders are virtually non-existent. We set up a network to raise awareness on human trafficking. On top of that, there is also illegal trade in timber, animals and drugs".



## Immagine non disponibile

But now the borders are closed and the military patrols the patchy border between Tabatinga and Leticia in Colombia, where about 1,500 people are infected, with 47 dead. "Indeed, the three countries responded differently and Brazil's attitude has been negative.

### **But the solution is not the militarization of borders."**

- said Father **Alfredo Ferro**, Coordinator of the Pan-Amazonian Jesuit Service - What should be done instead is to organize a meeting between the three countries aimed at policy harmonisation. Here the border has always been very porous, there are people with family members in Brazil. The real problem is that if you are hungry you don't stay at home, you go out to look for food. The social and health system here has collapsed, there is an endemic and structural problem. Leticia lacks intensive care, with poor transport connections, even when it comes to transportation of a sick person." On top of this the economy is plummeting, "there are no more tourists, it would be necessary to send planes with food. What is missing is a clear plan, a coordinated response."  
Confirmed Father **Ylmer Alonso Pérez**, in charge of Caritas Social Pastoral Care at the Apostolic Vicariate of Leticia: "There is only one hospital here, which has managed to admit only a few patients. Many are at home, in unsuitable conditions. There is a shortage of ambulances and ventilators. Swab specimens are brought to Bogotá and it takes three days to get test results back. People must stay at home and receive food, but it's not enough. The risk of contagion is very high among the indigenous people who are very poor and go out to cultivate their subsistence produce. As Apostolic Vicariate, "we are asking for the creation of a field hospital. *We have been distributing masks to the indigenous communities, along with medicines and food, and we are in touch with the Food Bank of the capital city.* But we are also offering spiritual and psychological support, through radio broadcasts and social networks, while the pedagogical aspect is equally important." **A defenseless community in Peru.** Father Ylmer told SIR that the situation in Peru is even worse than in Colombia. There are no large settlements near the *Tres Fronteras*, but the infection is spreading to the various villages, as confirmed by **Father César Luis Caro Puértolas**, Vicar General of the Apostolic Vicariate of San José del Amazonas, also as large as Northern Italy, in the Peruvian region bordering Brazil,

---

Colombia and Ecuador. The bishop, Monsignor José Javier Travieso, was the first in all of Latin America to be infected with Covid-19 and is now convalescing. " The situation is already serious", he said. "36 people have died, many Tikuna natives, with 287 confirmed infections and 750 suspected cases in the surrounding villages, especially on the island of Santa Rosa de Javari and in Caballococha, ours is a rural and indigenous vicariate with a very fragile healthcare service, formed by two small hospitals and some local medical centres that cooperate with neighbouring Colombia and the city of Leticia for treatment of some cases". The Apostolic Vicariate has launched an aid distribution campaign, relying on a comprehensive project funded by the Spanish Bishops' Conference's Misión América. The project involves the procurement of health care equipment, especially ventilators, medicines and protective devices. This is an essential source of aid for a community that otherwise "risks remaining with no protection whatsoever."

Bruno Desidera