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A young man from an isolated Amazonian tribe clutches a bundle of used clothing, a possible source of disease transmission, during initial contact with local villagers and Brazilian officials in July.

New wave of contact with isolated tribe

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By [Heather Pringle \(/author/heather-pringle\)](/author/heather-pringle) | 15 August 2014 5:45 pm | [0 Comments \(/latin-america/2014/08/new-wave-contact-isolated-tribe#disqus_thread\)](/latin-america/2014/08/new-wave-contact-isolated-tribe#disqus_thread)

In a remote frontier post in the Brazilian Amazon, a group of 24 isolated tribespeople made contact sometime in August with representatives from Brazil's Indian affairs department (FUNAI)—the second group to do so in less than 8

weeks. According to Survival International, a nongovernmental organization that advocates on behalf of tribal people, the newly contacted group consists of men, women, and children and [likely fled from violent attacks](#) (<http://www.survivalinternational.org/news/10394>) in Peru. This has yet to be confirmed by FUNAI, which is releasing few details about this latest contact.

[In a press conference in Portuguese \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ro1UZ5qj9pg&list=UUWjEoTAUV1LeFl4GwlmKIMg\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ro1UZ5qj9pg&list=UUWjEoTAUV1LeFl4GwlmKIMg) this week, however, Maria Augusta Assirati, FUNAI's president, announced that her department is now investigating reports of lethal attacks on tribal people by outsiders in Peru. The attacks may have prompted isolated groups to flee eastward into Brazil. "We cannot confirm that," Assirati said. "We are doing an investigation, with the support of the Peruvian government, to see what the pressures are and where they are."

In recent weeks, FUNAI [has faced criticism](#) (<http://news.sciencemag.org/health/2014/07/did-brazils-uncontacted-tribe-receive-proper-medical-care>) from several anthropologists for its handling of [the first contact episode](#) (<http://www.sciencemag.org/content/345/6193/125.summary?sid=8d2a3704-674c-437d-bb39-2f5a0bfac2e2>), in which seven tribespeople made contact with a FUNAI team and indigenous people living in the remote settlement of Simpatia, Brazil. Within days, the tribespeople, thought to be between 12 and 21 years old, contracted influenza. After receiving treatment from medics, the tribespeople returned to the forest, raising concerns that they could infect others in their home village, likely located in Peru. But at the press conference this week, Danielle Cavalcante, coordinator of Brazil's Special Secretariat on Indigenous Health, noted that there is "no indication" that flu had spread to other tribal people.

The latest contact raises the possibility that violent attacks in Peru have pushed many isolated tribespeople into Brazil where they may soon attempt to make contact—a prospect that may be daunting to cash-strapped FUNAI. Already the department has had to request an additional \$5 million from the Brazilian government to meet the needs of the newly contacted tribespeople.

To try to piece together what is prompting these contacts, FUNAI sent a set of questions to the Peruvian government about illegal activities such as drug trafficking in protected lands in Peru. FUNAI officials are now analyzing Peru's response, which they did not make public, in order to find ways to protect "not

only this group that made contact, but other groups in the region,” Assirati said.

The reports of violent assaults on isolated tribes in the Peruvian Amazon are plausible, says Chris Fagan, executive director of the Upper Amazon Conservancy in Jackson, Wyoming. “Peru’s anti-drug campaign has pushed cultivators, processors, and traffickers out of the Andean region and into the Amazon lowlands, and specifically into protected areas like Alto Purús National Park,” Fagan notes. Fagan himself unwittingly walked into a coca processing camp in the park in 2004. Since then, the processors have moved into even more remote corners of the park, he says. “Unfortunately, these are the same areas where the isolated tribes [live].”

The arrival of the drug trade along the Peruvian-Brazilian border has created serious problems. In a 2011 [paper \(http://upperamazon.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/SalisburyFagan2011CocaConservation.pdf?6bd5c0\)](http://upperamazon.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/SalisburyFagan2011CocaConservation.pdf?6bd5c0) published in *GeoJournal*, Fagan and geographer David Salisbury of the University of Richmond reported that heightened conflict between uncontacted tribespeople and narcotraffickers and illegal loggers along the Purús River had led to fatalities on both sides. “[W]e can surmise more uncontacteds are killed than traffickers, as their bows and arrows are no match for the traffickers’ modern weapons,” the two researchers noted.

Fagan would like to see strong government action on both sides of the border, including intensive training for local villagers about what to do should isolated tribespeople come calling. He also thinks that both Peru and Brazil need to step up policing the drug trade in the region and protecting the routes that tribal people take through the forest. “While the drugs may be coming from Peru, the smugglers are both Peruvian and Brazilian, and their continued activities are the result of inaction by both governments,” Fagan says.

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