

Peru evacuates Amazon village after raid by indigenous tribe

At least 39 people taken to Puerto Maldonado as officials search for motive behind latest bow-and-arrow attack by members of Mashco-Piro tribe

Dan Collyns in Lima

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Authorities in Peru have sent riverboats to evacuate a remote jungle village after it was raided by an indigenous tribe that has long lived in voluntary isolation in the country's south-eastern Amazon.

Around 200 men armed with bows and arrows raided the remote community of Monte Salvado near the border with Brazil on Friday, Patricia Balbuena, Peru's vice-minister of intercultural affairs, told the Guardian.

The raiders - members of the Mashco-Piro tribe - took machetes, rope, blankets and food in the attack on the village, which sits on the Piedras river in Peru's south-eastern Madre de Dios region, she said.

"There were no injuries although the men fired off arrows. The villagers took refuge in a guard post. They are safe but have no food and are terrified," Balbuena said. Weather had prevented police and army helicopters from reaching the community.

At least 39 people from Monte Salvado - 16 of whom are children - and 22 from the nearby settlement of Puerto Nuevo will be evacuated to the regional capital, Puerto Maldonado. Most of the adult population had already gone there to vote in elections when the raid took place, Balbuena said.

"Our worry is the large number of children," Lorena Prieto, director of Peru's office of Peoples in Isolation and Initial Contact who was co-ordinating the evacuation, told the Guardian by telephone from Madre de Dios. "We believe the Mashco-Piro are still in the area."

The appearance of up to 200 armed men marks a serious escalation from previous encounters with the isolated tribe, anthropologists said.

"We've never heard reported such a large movement of uncontacted people," said Prieto.

In August 2013, a group of more than 100 men, women and children appeared across the Piedras river from Monte Salvado. Men from the group brandished spears and aimed bows

at villagers in a three-day standoff before disappearing into the forest again.

“Normally what happens is family groups arrive and ask for tools and food then they leave,” Prieto said, adding there had been three Mashco-Piro visits already this year, in July, August and October.

“But this time the attitude was different,” she said. “This time it was just men, who were armed with bows and arrows, far outnumbering the villagers. They shot arrows and they sacked the whole village - they smashed windows, tore up clothing and killed all the domestic animals.

“On seeing their dogs and chickens dead and their village destroyed, the villagers were very frightened. This was a far more violent incursion than is usual. That’s why we’ve decided to evacuate everyone,” Prieto said.

Balbuena said: “These encounters are becoming more and more frequent. We are evaluating whether to permanently relocate these communities.”

Peru’s vice ministry of intercultural affairs was considering broaching a dialogue with the Mashco-Piro through Yine interpreters to better understand their needs, she added.

Balbuena said the vice-ministry would seek advice from its Brazilian counterpart, Brazil’s National Indian Foundation or FUNA, which uses strategic food stores and specialised medical teams and to support indigenous populations in voluntary isolation.

Around 15 “uncontacted” tribes with up to 15,000 members are believed to live in the dense forests of the Peruvian Amazon. Direct contact with them is banned out of concern that they could succumb to common illnesses.

Anthropologists are trying to understand what caused this latest incident. Balbuena said climate change, which was causing abrupt drops in temperature in this area of the Amazon, may have been a driver.

Balbuena, though, dismissed the idea that the tribe had been the subject of threats from drug-traffickers or illegal loggers, saying no “illicit activity” had been detected in the Madre de Dios indigenous reserve, where several hundred Mashco-Piro are believed to live in several nomadic clans.

“When there’s pressure on their territory or attacks against them, that’s when there are these violent reactions,” Beatriz Huertas, an anthropologist working with Peruvian indigenous organisations, told the Guardian.

“The state shouldn’t be thinking about sending helicopters. These situations should be handled with more care,” Huertas added.

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