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MEMBERS of indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon have contracted covid-19, fuelling concerns that the disease could devastate indigenous groups throughout South America – including uncontacted tribes in the region. Many fear whole communities could be killed if they contract the coronavirus.

The first confirmed case of the virus in Sepahua, a remote riverside town in the Peruvian Amazon, was reported by the local public health authority on 6 June. Eight days later, the number of cases had increased to 27. Sepahua serves as a gateway to five national parks, some of which were created to protect the right of uncontacted groups to remain isolated.

“We are expecting everywhere in the Amazon to get hit eventually,” says Daniel Aristizábal, who leads the Isolated Peoples Program at the Amazon Conservation Team in Suriname.

From Brazil to Colombia, many indigenous groups have distanced their communities from others for decades to preserve their way of life. As word of the coronavirus spread, some that no longer lived in the region’s rainforests sought refuge there again.

Colombia’s Nukak – a seminomadic tribe forcibly displaced from the Amazon in the 1980s and 90s – returned to the Amazon in March, seeking distance from the contagion. Other indigenous groups have blocked roads and bolstered security perimeters, prohibiting visits from outsiders.

Some indigenous communities may face a higher risk of death from covid-19 than the general population, says Clayton Coelho at the Federal University of São Paulo in Brazil. “Most indigenous groups today are made up of small populations, implying low genetic variability. Low genetic variability reduces the chances that we will find individuals naturally resistant to the disease,” says Coelho. It is possible that a group may be naturally resistant, but it isn’t probable, he says.

Very remote communities may be particularly vulnerable, as people may not have had exposure to other coronaviruses over generations, says Nina Moeller at Coventry University in the UK. But it isn’t clear whether that would help improve immunity to the current coronavirus, she says.

In Colombia, the virus has infiltrated 33 indigenous groups, with 834 confirmed cases and 28 deaths as of 11 June, according to the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia. In Brazil, 98 indigenous groups have seen infections, with 5361 confirmed cases and 281 deaths as of 14 June, according to the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil. In Peru, NGOs say that cases among indigenous groups are so high and the spread so diffuse that they are unable to keep track. The Peruvian government has enforced strict social isolation since 15 March and is delivering food parcels to indigenous communities, but some already have poor health due to malnutrition, pollution and inadequate healthcare. Some pigs and chickens in the region’s rainforests have died with them, says Aristizábal. “It’s particularly tragic for these communities as the elders are the coordinators of society and the owners of secrets.”

Unlike with Western science, he says, “if an elder dies, their ability to make a particular medicine dies with them”.

A lack of national park guards due to coronavirus measures may also be allowing encroachment into these tribes’ territories by drug traffickers and loggers taking advantage of the pandemic to ramp up illegal activities. Such actions have historically introduced malaria and sexually transmitted infections into indigenous groups, says Aristizábal. “They could be vectors of coronavirus,” he says. Satellite images confirm that miners are as close as 5 kilometres to the territories of isolated tribes, says Aristizábal.

“The risk [of contagion] has never been higher,” says Antenor Vaz, the former head of Brazil’s indigenous affairs agency. Vaz says the suspected 185 uncontacted tribes in the Amazon, of which 66 are confirmed in existence in eight countries, are “in total danger”.

Medical assistance could potentially save uncontacted tribes, but delivering it would be a complex, delicate task. In Peru, for instance, laws ban the state and NGOs from interacting directly with uncontacted tribes. Protocols require healthcare services to be installed in nearby areas, not delivered directly to uncontacted tribes. To do so would force contact and disregard a group’s self-determination.