[Alnoor Ladha,felipe Viveros And Raissa Galvao](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/alnoor-ladha-felipe-viveros-and-raissa-galvao)

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**Crisis in Brazil**

The COVID-19 pandemic, which claimed more than a million lives and battered the global economy in just a few months, also provided us with an accurate picture of what our future may look like if we do not reverse the trajectory we are currently on.

Indeed, the systems breakdown experienced in many parts of the world due to the inability of capitalist and corporatist states to efficiently respond to this unprecedented public health emergency is just a preview of the devastation we will undoubtedly witness in the next 20 years if we do not start working to reverse, and build resilience against, the interconnected consequences of climate change, crony capitalism and deepening inequality across the world.

Brazil is the perfect case in point for what’s happening more broadly. It is a diverse country with rampant inequality and soaring deforestation. As a result, vulnerable communities, especially Indigenous peoples, are being hit first and hardest by emerging crises such as the pandemic. As climate change exacerbates each of these crises, and with the federal state unable or unwilling to offer meaningful support, these communities find themselves stuck in a situation where destruction begets more destruction.

Imagine being without running water and electricity for three days. Now imagine being in this situation at the height of a deadly viral outbreak and in a very hot country. Add another month to this misery, and you will have the nightmare thousands of people are currently going through in the northern Brazilian state of Amapa.

Due to a combination of negligence, climate change and abandonment by the state, Amapa’s electricity grid blew up on November 3 and the region entered chaos.

When transformers were knocked out by a fire at the main substation in Macapa, 13 cities and more than 90 percent of the state’s population, around 750,000 people, were left in the dark. At the time, the region was under heavy rainfall, so many thought the fire was caused by lightning and hoped that it could be fixed in a short period. But the extreme weather had also caused the mobile network to collapse and communications were extremely limited, so nobody really knew what was going on.

After 36 hours without electricity, neighbourhoods began running out of water, local shops ran out of supplies and refrigerated foods started to rot. To add to the chaos, domestic power generators started to struggle to provide sufficient electricity to the state’s hospitals. Still, nobody had any answers.

Around this time, a few rich neighbourhoods regained power, but the majority of the state’s population was still in darkness. After four full days without power, people started to organise protests to show their outrage and demand support from the federal authorities. These protests, however, were met with rubber bullets and tear gas.

After eight consecutive days without power, an investigation showed that the substation had not been struck by lightning, but that the transformers failed because they were not being properly maintained. The Spanish corporation, Isolux, which won the contract during a privatisation drive in January 2020, was responsible for maintaining the substation. After being outed as being responsible for the suffering of thousands of people, the company offered neither an explanation nor an apology.

The people of Amapa were angry, and for good reason. Amapa state has three hydroelectric plants, and shares frontiers with the state of Para, Brazil’s second-largest producer of electricity. Strangely “Amapaenses” pay the highest electricity bills in the country and appear to have no protection against power outages.

As people continued their protests against the state and federal authorities, on November 12, it was announced that the two rounds of local elections that were scheduled for November 15 and 29 were postponed due to the “increasing security concerns” stemming from the power outage. On top of being left to fend for themselves amid a pandemic and extreme weather, the residents of Amapa were now prevented from going to the polls and choosing their political representatives.

In an attempt to seize media attention and calm tensions, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro flew to Amapa on November 22 to finally “fix” the problem. Bolsonaro’s media moment turned into a fiasco, however, when the electric grid blew up once again just a few hours after he flipped the switches for two new generators that were supposed to fully restore power across the state.

Weeks later, the problem is still not resolved. Many parts of the state are only receiving intermittent power and experiencing regular outages. In late November, a storm hit Macapa, flooding homes and shops, and leaving locals in deeper mayhem. Meanwhile, the national media is largely ignoring the chaos in the state, and the international community is also turning a blind eye to what is happening.

At a local level, people are desperately calling for the federal state to end its privatisation drives and start taking care of its citizens. But as they are aware that their calls are likely to fall on deaf ears, they are also organising to help themselves. They have created a network of volunteers, “Amapa Solidario” (Solidarity with Amapa), to help those worst affected by the emergency in every way they can. They are also running crowdfunding campaigns and trying to bring attention to their plight through local media organisations, such as Midia NINJA and Casa Ninja Amazonia.

Sadly, Amapa is not an isolated case. The chaos in the Brazilian state is just one example of what happens when political power is fully centralised and state resources are sold to corporations which prioritise profits over meeting the needs of local populations. Once they gain control over local resources, these corporations use their political and economic power to feed the centralised state machinery further. The problems that often disproportionately harm vulnerable populations are exacerbated further through systemic racism and discrimination.

Excerpted: ‘The crisis in Brazil’s Amapa state is a warning for the world’

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