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**CHOICES FOR BRAZIL—II**

**Genocide in the jungle**

**ROBERT WASSERSTROM**

**L**AST NOVEMBER 14, several prominent anthropologists and American Indian leaders called a press conference in Washington to publicize one of the least hopeful causes they had yet championed: the plight of Yanomamo Indians in northern Brazil. Joined by Isabel Letelier (wife of assassinated Chilean ambassador Orlando Letelier), they explained that the Yanomamo—a group of 17,000 Indians who live on both sides of the Brazilian-Venezuelan border—faced imminent extinction at the hands of mineral prospectors with strong ties to such multi-nationals as U.S. Steel, Alcan, Reynolds Aluminum, and Hanna Mining. Lost between the hostages in Iran and the high cost of heating oil, genocide in the jungle—and the role of U.S. corporations there—didn't make the front pages.

That genocide is taking place against Indians in Brazil (whose numbers have decreased in this century from one million to perhaps 120,000) cannot easily be disputed. As early as November, 1971, a group of Roman Catholic bishops

denounced the extermination of native people in the Amazon. Within a few months, such charges were repeated by Apoena Meirelles, an official of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI, Brazil's Bureau of Indian Affairs). Describing conditions on the Aripuanã reservation, which had been invaded by various mining firms, he wrote that "In less than four years, the lands of the Cintas Largas and Surui [tribes] have been dismembered. Epidemics have already left their mark, and the tribes have taken the first steps down the long road to misery, hunger and the prostitution of their women. . . ." Almost simultaneously, another senior Indian agent, Antonio Cotrim Soares, quit his job after watching native people along the expanding frontier go blind from venereal diseases or die of the flu. "I am tired," he declared in a highly-publicized interview, "of being the Indians' grave-digger." Unfortunately, Cotrim's gesture appears to have had little effect on official policy: in the past decade, twenty-six tribes—including at least 30,000 people—have been completely destroyed; perhaps an equal number are currently undergoing rapid disintegration.

Stories of this kind sound so depressingly familiar; Indian policy in Brazil often recalls the worst moments of our own obsession with Manifest Destiny. Responding to questions about his treatment of the Yanomamo, for example, the gover-

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nor of Roraima territory declared recently that "an area as rich as this—with gold, diamonds and uranium—cannot afford the luxury of conserving half a dozen Indian tribes which are holding back the development of Brazil." Similar sentiments have dominated public discussion of the "indigenous question" in all segments of Brazilian society. Nor are such views likely to change in the near future: upon becoming "super-minister" in the new government a few months ago, Delfim Netto described his political and economic program in absolutely unequivocal terms—"Development above all else."

**T**O SPECIALISTS WHO have followed Brazil's economic miracle during the past few years, such events have come as no surprise. On the contrary, they may be traced back to 1970, when President Garrastazu Médici announced his Plan for National Integration—a massive program to transport landless peasants from the poverty-stricken Northeast to Amazonia. Borrowing large sums of money from foreign banks, he began to construct the three-thousand-mile-long Trans-Amazon Highway. Simultaneously, he authorized a government agency, the Institute for Agrarian Reform and Colonization (INCRA) to offer potential settlers a house, provisional title to 250 acres of land and a grubstake of six months' wages. All together, over \$1 billion was allocated to these schemes, which it was hoped would eventually involve upwards of five million homesteaders. Unfortunately, initial results were not encouraging: within a few years, scientists such as Robert Goodland of Cary Aboretum and Howard Irwin of the New York Botanical Garden reported that in many places the thin Amazonian soils, stripped of their protective covering, had completely washed away. Faced with renewed famine, desperate colonists simply abandoned their homesteads and returned to the Northeast or squatted illegally on more fertile lands. But by that time the idea of taming the jungle had caught hold in official circles, indeed had become a useful way of distracting attention from more visible social and economic problems.

By that time, too, other changes were in the wind. Beginning in 1970, the Brazilian government had asked Litton Industries and Goodyear Corporation to undertake Project RADAM, a detailed inventory of mineral, hydraulic, and biotic resources throughout the Amazon. Within three years, it had become obvious that the region was littered with high-grade deposits of tin, bauxite, iron, manganese, even gold. Naturally, multinational firms from around the world expressed immediate interest in working these deposits, which often lay on Indian lands or in territory which had been provisionally granted to homesteaders. For its part, the state-owned mining company, Companhia Vale do Rio Doce (CVRD), announced that it would be happy to join such firms in financing and administering their Brazilian operations. In fact, during the late 1960s, CVRD had already set up a joint venture with U.S. Steel to mine ore on 400,000 acres of land in the Serra dos Carajas area. To facilitate operations of this sort, successive military governments had weakened the country's mineral code (which originally limited the size of mining concessions

to 12,500 acres) so that by 1969 a single company could exploit 125,000 acres in its own name and 75,000 more through its subsidiaries. Given these enticements, and given CVRD's willingness to share the costs of exploration, virtually "every major metals company in the industrialized world" (as the *New York Times* put it) set up shop in the Amazon. The question of who owned the land, they felt, and of Indian rights was not their affair.

Nor did this situation improve after 1974, when President Ernesto Geisel scrapped the plans his predecessors had devised for the region and unveiled a new project of his own: the Polamazônia Program. Faced with a burgeoning foreign debt and an overheated economy, Geisel and his advisors saw the Amazon not as a dumping ground for landless peasants but rather as a major pole of renewed economic growth. In this respect, they were encouraged by the fact that a number of entrepreneurs had already set up enormous estates to produce beef for export to the United States and Europe. In one area, for example, Volkswagen had bought 56,000 acres of virgin land which it had reportedly doused with 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T (Agent Orange, the defoliant used in Vietnam) to speed the transition from forest to pastureland. So, too, did Swift-Armour, which apparently was not concerned about polluting the streams that ran through the neighboring Kaapör reservation. At the same time, American financial wizard Daniel K. Ludwig (father of the supertanker) had purchased a ranch the size of Connecticut and had cleared 250,000 acres for cattle production. As it turned out, the jungle was much too valuable to waste on a handful of Indians and on the homesteaders who had moved in among them.

What role did FUNAI, which oversees native affairs and administers the reservations, play in all of these events? According to Brazilian law, the agency's mandate in such matters is particularly unambiguous: "Native land," reads the Indian Statute of 1973, "cannot be the object of leasing or renting or any juridical act or negotiation that restricts the full exercise of direct possession by the native community or forest dweller." In order to safeguard these rights, the statute directs FUNAI to ascertain how many Indians live in the region, where they are located and how much land they require. But like the Bureau of Indian Affairs here, FUNAI is also a branch of the Brazilian Interior Ministry, which bears major responsibility for carrying out the Polamazônia program. In keeping with this dual mission, other sections of the Indian law permit the govern-



ment to exploit subsoil resources in native areas as long as part of the profits are placed in trust for indigenous people. Not surprisingly, then, FUNAI has shown considerable reluctance to intervene in favor of such people when Indian welfare and development policy conflict—as they did on the Aripuanã reservation. On the contrary, it becomes increasingly clear that the agency's primary task is to manage native groups in behalf of foreign corporations and local business interests.

**I**T IS PRECISELY for these reasons that anthropologists and Indian leaders here are now concerned about the Yanomamo, who constitute the largest isolated tribal nation in the western hemisphere. Unaccustomed to Western diseases and laissez-faire economics, they find themselves the nominal owners of uranium and cassiterite—valuable minerals which have whetted the appetites of local prospectors and large multi-nationals alike. Rather than help the Yanomamo negotiate a favorable arrangement with these enterprises, however, FUNAI proposes to split them up among twenty-one non-contiguous reserves so small that they would soon be forced to abandon their traditional way of life and take up begging or migrant labor. Opponents of this plan, who include a diversified community of Brazilian scientists, conservationists and church people, argue that it seems calculated principally to make sizable tracts of land available for unhindered mining and to assure the extinction of most Yanomamo. Last June, they presented an alternative program to the government which called for the creation of a large and geographically continuous reservation. At first, they were hopeful that President João Baptista Figueiredo, anxious to establish his credentials as a political moderate, would accept their proposal. But these hopes were shattered in November when the president of FUNAI, a military officer who had shown some sympathy for the idea, was replaced by Col. João Carlos Nobre de Veiga, who had previously served as security director of the state prospecting company.

In a deeper sense, the Yanomamo issue raises fundamental questions not only about the rights of native people but also about the role of U.S. corporations abroad. The Amazon contains one-fifth of the earth's water, one-third of its forests and is thought to contribute half of its yearly oxygen supply. Despite these facts, the Brazilian Institute of Forestry Development calculates that over one million trees are being destroyed each year; during the past decade alone, such destruction has engulfed twenty-four percent of the area. At this rate, the entire jungle will disappear within the next twenty-five or thirty years—an event which could bring about irreversible changes in the earth's climate and ecology. Clearly, decisions of this magnitude must not be left to corporate officers and their friends in local planning ministries. Nor can it be said that poor countries like Brazil cannot afford to worry about such niceties as environmental protection and the survival of archaic ways of life. On the contrary, the real wages of working people in Brazil have declined steadily since the economic miracle began, while infant mortality—a finely-tuned indicator of general social welfare—has risen. The point is that

most Brazilians are being forced to pay the tremendous costs of a development policy which serves above all to sustain corporate earnings. And of course, the heaviest burden will fall precisely upon groups like the Yanomamo, who are least able to make themselves heard in political debate. The problem of regulating American business in such circumstances is undoubtedly a complex one, full of pitfalls and international complications. But if reasonable and just solutions cannot be found, then within the next generation we shall all pay a very heavy—indeed unbearable—price.

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