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GOLD RUSH IN THE AMAZON RAIN FOREST.
BRAZIL'S GENOCIDE OF THE YANOMAMO INDIANS.

The killing of four Yanomamo Indians and two gold prospectors in the Amazon rain forest, results in Catholic missionaries expulsion

Gold rush in the Amazon rain forest

A 1968-73 survey of the Amazon rain forest by aircrafts and by geologists (RADAM-BRAZIL project) showed an abundance of mineral wealth, which includes uranium, cassiterite, molybdenum, strategically important ores. Most mines are uneconomic because of their remotness and lack of access to cheap means of transportation. However, alluvial gold and diamonds found in creeks on the mountain slopes can be easily and cheaply regained by unskilled prospectors called garimpeiros. As a result, there is a GOLD RUSH going on in the Amazon basin attracting thousands of Brazilians from Northeast and South states of Brazil.

Since early 1980 garimpeiros have been searching gold and diamonds on the banks of the Couto de Magalhaes river, a tributary of the Mucajai river that flows eastward into the Branco river, the main river of the Federal Territory of Roraima. In early 1982 prospectors finally found gold nuggets in this area. At present, at least 500 garimpeiros are mining in an area about the size of Manhattan. They are financed by rich Brazilian businessmen from Boa Vista and Manaus with the tacit support of local authorities and police.

Until the early seventies the areas of Couto de Magalhaes e Mucajai rivers were inhabited only by Yanomamo Indians. In the mid seventies the construction of the Northern Perimeter Highway (BR 210) brought epidemic diseases to their villages. Hundreds Yanomamo died of measles and whooping cough: the survivors fled to the interland. Since 1979 FUNAI (Brazilian Government Agency for Indians Affairs), anthropologists, missionaries and organizations that defend the Indian rights are asking the Brazilian Government to create an exclusive YANOMAMO PARK (reservation). Under the pressure of powerful Roraima authorities, business and landowners the Yanomamo land has never received official Government sanction as a reserve, despite the 1973 Estatuto do Indio (Law # 6001) "all Indian lands should have been demarcated by the end of 1978". Unabashed capitalism by large corporate companies (Brazilians and multinationals) have disregarded the illegality of their actions resulting in the exploitation of both garimpeiros and Indians. Thousands of garimpeiros without any workers compensations are victims of tropical diseases (malaria, hepatitis, etc.) and are subjected to the ruthless "law of the jungle" - homicide among prospectors is a common occurrence. The new "lords of the forest" who live luxuriously in the cities of Boa Vista and Manaus exploit the garimpeiros by charging exorbitant prices for the most essential goods (for example, a tiny can of sardine cost one gram of gold!) which is reminiscent of the old "lords of the drought-stricken Northeast region of Brazil" who exploited the peasants.

Massacre in the forest

August 15, 1987, saw a fight break out between Yanomamo Indians and garimpeiros at the Couto de Magalhaes river mining site. Two Brazilians and four Yanomamo were killed. An angry mob of Brazilian garimpeiros desecrated the bodies of the four slain Yanomamo. By August 20, FUNAI agents arrived at the site of the massacre and confronted the armed garimpeiros. They were asked to move out of the area, part of the Yanomamo reservation. In retaliation, the garimpeiros union of Roraima -supported by businessmen and landowners- agreed to leave the area only if the Catholic missionaries at the Catrimani river left the Yanomamo area also. The Catholic Mission on the Catrimani River was established in October 1965 by two Italian missionaries, one of whom lost his life in November 1968 while trying to make contacts with another group of Indians called Waimiris-Atroaris. Presently, the Catrimani Mission staff consists of an Italian priest, a Brazilian nun in charge of a small hospital and a Brazilian couple who are working as assistants. The 22-year-old Catholic mission saved the lives of hundreds Yanomamo Indians between 1974 and 1977 during the construction of the Northern Perimeter Highway when disease ran rampant. Since 1972 the missionaries sent monthly reports of their activities to FUNAI and to the Brazilian Government. They always worked with FUNAI agents and with local authorities. Besides, the Catrimani Mission is located about 110 kilometers south of the conflict area and in the past the missionaries did not have any political or religious involvement with the garimpeiros and the Yanomamo of the Couto de Magalhaes river.

Catholic Church defense of the Indians and Brazilian peasants rights

After nearly a decade of struggle between the Catholic Church of Roraima and the powerful businessmen and landowners who rule the Territory, the underlying cause of why the missionaries at Catrimani are being used as "pawns", becomes clear. Bishop Aldo Mongiano with his staff of 20 priests, 5 brothers and 35 sisters are being accused by the greedy and lawless businessmen and landowners of Roraima of being foreigners (only 55% are Italians) and of inciting the Indians against the establishment. However, the real issue is the control over the Indian land and the exploitation of its wealth on behalf of an already rich business establishment and Brazilian-international corporate companies.

On August 20, FUNAI agents gave in to the garimpeiros demand that the Catholic missionaries at Catrimani be expelled, thus leaving the area wide open for future minerals exploitation. Before the priest left the mission, an agreement was reached between Bishop Mongiano and FUNAI that the Brazilian nun could stay at the mission hospital to assist the sick Yanomamo. However, under continued pressure from the Roraima Government this concession was abrogated. On August 27 two airplanes with eight

policemen, a FUNAI agent, nurse and an anthropologist landed at the Catrimani Mission and expelled the remaining staff. The unscrupulous FUNAI took over the Catholic mission leaving little hope for the two Catholic missionaries and their assistants to return. The taking over of the Catrimani Mission by FUNAI is the result of the revengeful Government of Roraima ruled by lawless and greedy businessmen and landowners. FUNAI, the Brazilian Agency that should have protected the Yanomamo rights, is showing once more that is a puppet organization protecting the economic interests of powerful people and allowing the GENOCIDE of the Yanomamo Indians.

Ultimately, the Yanomamo Indians will be the ones who will suffer the worst consequences. In few years their territory will be divided by the Government sanction invaders. The Indians will become an exploited labor force and join the millions of dispossessed Brazilians who are hopelessly surviving in one of the richest countries of the world.

P.S. Please, do not write the missionaries names. On page 3 there is the map of Roraima.

