

New Projects Threaten Brazilian Tribes

New highway, mining, and hydroelectric projects in the Amazon Basin pose a serious threat to Brazil's remaining Indian tribes. Recently, we received a series of reports describing conditions among the Yanomamo tribe in the Alto Catrimani region of the Territory of Roraima in northwestern Brazil. Until 1971, the Yanomamo Indians had very little contact with outsiders, their health was excellent, and their culture was intact. Then in 1974, the Northern Perimeter Highway reached the Alto Catrimani. Since that time the Yanomamo Indians have been under attack.

The Northern Perimeter Highway was a mixed blessing for the Yanomamo. On the one hand, the new road enabled the Italian missionaries at Catrimani to take sick Indians to a hospital in the city of Caracarai, some 100 kilometers from the tribe's homeland. On the other hand, when the Indians returned from the city, they often carried diseases previously unknown among the tribe.

In December 1976, a measles epidemic struck the Indians at Catrimani. By February, more than a hundred Indians had come to the mission station for medical aid. Then, word reached the mission station that the measles epidemic had spread to outlying villages. In April, a journalist traveled to these distant villages to assess the conditions of the tribe.

"In the first village," this observer reported, "we saw Indians lying on the floors of their houses, because they were unable to walk. In the second village, several Indians had taken refuge. They were all ill. They were unable to hunt and looked like corpses, all weak and famished. They all had measles and now they were suffering from other complications, such as bronchitis and pneumonia." This reporter estimated that 67 Yanomamo Indians died from the epidemic. Photographs that accompanied the report showed the miserable state of health of some of the Indians who had survived.

Contamination also seems imminent among a much larger Yanomamo population in the Surucucus region of Roraima. For several months, the Brazilian National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) has been carrying out an aerial survey of previously unknown Yanomamo villages in the area. In July,

FUNAI announced the discovery of 15 Yanomamo villages of "enormous proportions and densely populated by Indians in a primitive state."

The fate of these Indians will depend largely on the course of mineral explorations in the Surucucus region. As far back as February 1975, rich uranium deposits were discovered in Surucucus. More recently, prospectors working for a Brazilian company named Alem-Ecuador have been exploring for cassiterite in the area. FUNAI has been unable to stop contact between miners



—from Time

and Indians, and it is likely that, as at Catrimani, diseases will soon reach the Surucucus Yanomamo.

Minerals have always been more important than Indians in Brazil. Today, the major problem in the Amazon is how to gain the capital and technology to extract Brazil's immense mineral deposits. As far back as 1975, Project Radam, the huge aerial photographic survey, had already provided a detailed mapping of the mineral profile of the entire Amazon region.

In January 1977, the Brazilian gov-

ernment announced the signing of a contract for the construction of the Tucuruí hydroelectric power station in the Tocantins River Basin. When completed, this project will provide 3.7 million kilowatts of electricity to the Carajas iron-ore mine and to a proposed Japanese-Brazilian aluminum smelter in Belem. A reservoir associated with this project will also flood a large section of the Parakana and Pucuruí Indian Reserves.

The Parakana Indians had their first taste of civilization in 1971 when workers on the Trans-Amazon Highway invaded their lands. A Brazilian doctor who visited the Parakana soon after this invasion found a "pattern of promiscuity" between Indians and outsiders. Thirty-five Parakana women and two FUNAI agents were discovered to have venereal diseases. At least eight Parakana children were born blind and six others had died from dysentery.

FUNAI hopes to relocate the three tribal groups now inhabiting the Parakana Indian Reserve before the Tucuruí project floods their lands. However, only one of these groups, numbering 94 people, has had contact with outsiders since the construction of the Trans-Amazon Highway. The other two groups, numbering 100 and 400 people each, are reported to be wary of each other and openly hostile to FUNAI.

A major question is whether the Brazilian government will be able to raise the funds needed to carry through with these mining and hydroelectric projects. In May, U.S. Steel announced that it would withdraw its 49.2-percent share in the Carajas iron-ore project. The Brazilian government, however, intends to go ahead with the project and believes that several private foreign banks are interested in helping to finance it.

In September, the Brazilian government concluded an agreement with a consortium of 66 foreign banks, led by the Bank of America, to obtain a \$250 million credit for the development of hydroelectric facilities. The success or failure of these international loans may determine whether Indian peoples survive, or whether, as in the case of the Parakana, they will be flooded off their lands.

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