

Povos Indígenas no Brasil

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Brazil's Indians Have Seen Too Much Progress



A FUNAI agent (center), in 1977, making contact with a Nambiquara group for the first time.



By WARREN HOGE

RIO DE JANEIRO — In "Tristes Tropiques," a classic of anthropological literature, Claude Lévi-Strauss recorded his impressions of an Indian tribe in the middle of Brazil's western wastelands some 40 years ago. "The couples embrace as if seeking to recapture a lost unity," he wrote, watching them drift off to sleep huddled on the ground near a fire for warmth. "I can sense in all of them an immense kindness, a profoundly carefree attitude, a naive and charming animal satisfaction and ... something which might be called the most truthful and moving expression of human love."

Fifteen years later, Kalervo Oberg, then a research scientist with the Smithsonian Institution, found these same Indians "surly and impolite even to rudeness One does not have to remain long among them in order to feel this underlying hatred, mistrust and despair."

The Indians are the Nambiquara of Mato Grosso, the Brazilian state bordering Bolivia, and the difference between the two observations is the result of repeated encounters with "civilization." As Darcy Ribeiro, an impassioned defender of his country's native people, recounted, they faced "dogs, chains, Winchesters, machine guns, napalm, arsenic, clothes contaminated with smallpox, false certificates, removal, deportations, highways, fences, fires, weeds, cattle, the decrees of law and the denial of facts." Thus, the Nambiquara numbers, 10,000 at the turn of the century, are now down to 600.

For the 200,000 surviving Indians of Brazil, such tragedy continues. In the northeastern state of Alagoas, for example, the rector of a university wants to locate his new campus on sacred burial grounds. In the northwest, the Nambiquara sit in the middle of Brazil's greatest development project, the colonizing of Mato Grosso and the adjoining territory, soon to be a state, Rondônia.

By Project Polonoroeste's original timetable, an army of bulldozers should be advancing on what's left of Nambiquara lands, but there are problems. Construction bids have exceeded the \$700 million budget. The World Bank, a principal backer, has withheld promised funds pending a Government commitment to protect the Indians. And Survival International, a nonprofit organization that works on behalf of indigenous and tribal people has committed itself to guarding the Indians' rights (Survival International at work, see box).

Whether Survival International's remonstrances

name of only economically rational development."

This seems the case with the Nambiquara, who first met the outside world when Candido Mariano da Silva Rondon began stringing a telegraph line through their Amazon territory in 1907. The invention of radio telegraphy in 1922 rendered the system obsolete, but the Nambiquara were already doomed. Migrants had brought diseases against which they had no immunity. Settlers induced them to sell their land for trinkets. During World War II, they were virtually enslaved to tap Amazon rubber supplies. In the early 1960's, Brazil's military leaders decided to develop the vast inland tracts of savanna and jungle, and thousands of Indians saw their forests felled and fields plowed under by cattle ranchers.

In 1968, the much-criticized National Indian Foundation, FUNAI, created a reserve for the Nambiquara that embraced only the most arid fifth of their original holdings. The rest of the territory, guaranteed to them under the Brazilian Constitution, was opened for outside occupation. FUNAI issued settlers required certificates promising to remove the Indians. When the Indians refused to move, FUNAI first considered relocating the reserve to the south. It finally created sylvan islands for the Indians in the midst of the deforested ranch land, islands in which some Nambiquara already lived, but to which other Nambiquara refused to move.

The new project would create farming and ranching communities, an ecological reserve and a national park in an area larger than New England, New York and Pennsylvania combined and where 8,000 Indians live. It will also reroute the 950-mile highway linking the capital of Mato Grosso, Cuiabá, with the capital of Rondônia, Porto Velho, right through Nambiquara villages in the Guaporé Valley.

The World Bank is being asked to finance 35 percent of the development. But a bank spokesman said it wants certain commitments from the Brazilian Government, including demarcation of Indian land within the project, eviction of squatters from those lands, guarantees of inviolability for the preserve and upgraded health facilities for the Indians.

The plan FUNAI submitted to the bank, said Mr. Price, does not even deal with the most fundamental issue — land ownership. Under a 1973 law, FUNAI should have completed demarcations two years ago. Instead, led by the former security chief for the state mining company, it is opening already demarcated land to mineral prospecting. That policy could prove particularly destructive to the Yanomani Indians, the largest unacculturated tribe in South America, who live atop lodes of tungsten, titanium, gold, uranium, bauxite and cassiterite.

The Brazilian Government is eyeing this mineral wealth as one way of paying off its \$56 billion foreign debt, leading many people to believe that FUNAI is fulfilling the real hope of national leaders that the Indian problem would simply disappear. "When FUNAI talks about 'emancipating' the Indians or 'integrating' them into Brazilian life," said Anthony Seeger, chairman of the department of anthropology at the National Museum in Rio, "all they really mean is that Indians will be left to their own devices like other unlanded poor."

and the World Bank's good intentions can save the Nambiquara, however, remains a question. A bank official, who asked that his name not be used, said in a telephone interview from Washington, "We have forced the Government into a dialogue with international interests over the Indian issue, and that is a great breakthrough. They have agreed to give us the right to monitor the development." David Price, an American anthropologist who lived with the Nambiquara for 17 months and did a report for the bank, disagrees, suggesting that it might be better "if the operation were conducted on a hit or miss basis." Too often, he said, "things undertaken in the name of rational development end up being things done in the