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THE YANOMAMI: DECIMATION IN BRAZIL

by Catherine V. Howard

Events are rapidly heating up in Brazil over what to do about the 45,000 freelance gold panners who have invaded the territory of the Yanomami Indians over the past two years. With scenes reminiscent of some latter-day Wild West, the massive gold rush is causing innumerable deaths among the Yanomami by epidemics, massacres, and mercury poisoning. Having little contact with non-Indians until the 1970s, the estimated 15,000 Yanomami, of whom 9,000 live in Brazil in the northern state of Roraima, form the largest unacculturated tribe left in the Americas. They are now the victims not only of the gold miners' guns, diseases and chemicals, but of Brazilian government policies that have encouraged the invasion.

Pressure on the government to take action is intensifying from all quarters: indigenist advocates, human rights groups, lawyers, anthropologists, environmentalists, church leaders and the United Nations. Indians from eighty other tribes organized large protest marches in several cities in September, joined by sympathizers from the public outraged at government complacency.

Even certain sectors within the government are in revolt. On October 16, the Brazilian Public Prosecutor's Office lodged a Federal court action against the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), the Environmental Agency (IBAMA) and the Republic as a whole. It charges them with failing to uphold Constitutional provisions guaranteeing land rights

to native groups and prohibiting mining or development on their lands unless publicly debated in Congress in consultation with the tribes. It calls for the miners to be evicted and for the legal boundaries of a unified Yanomami reservation to be restored. Senator Severo Gomes, who saw first-hand the tragic conditions in Yanomami villages, says, "The alternative, leaving the situation as it is, means the final solution to the problem of the Yanomami: extermination."

The miners' union has threatened "all-out war" on the Yanomami in retaliation if any attempt is made to remove them. Signs that they may make good on this promise came in early November, when they executed three Indians.

The assault on the Yanomami includes deadly epidemics of measles, influenza, malaria and tuberculosis brought in by the miners. In some villages, 90% of the population are slowly losing their eyesight from onchocerciasis, or "river blindness." The Yanomami have had too few years of exposure to Western diseases to have built up any natural biological immunity; vaccines and medicines are crucial. Yet FUNAI, the official Indian bureau, maintains only two doctors in the city for the state's 35,000 Indians. Some advocates call for the International Red Cross to send in emergency medical teams.

Malnutrition, unknown before the invasion, is weakening a population already vulnerable to foreign diseases. In lands that once supplied plentiful food, the Yanomami are now barely able to get enough to eat each day. The prospectors have killed off or frightened away the game and poisoned the fish by dumping mercury into the rivers as a toxic by-product of gold-panning techniques.

The dangers of mercury are not confined to the Yanomami territory. Once it enters the food chain, it passes on from species to species and eventually to humans, causing birth defects and death. Scientists report that the mercury carried downstream along Yanomami rivers has now reached the Rio Branco, a major tributary of the Amazon River, and is headed towards Manaus, a city of one million people.

The Yanomami are traditional hunter-gatherers and horticulturalists with a rich religious life, egalitarian society and simple material culture. Few have ventured out from their homeland, learned Portuguese or adopted habits of the surrounding national society. The hordes of armed intruders are now tearing the Yanomami from their way of life. Village clearings, once animated by rituals and daily tasks, are now dominated by airstrips. Eighty clandestine runways have been opened up for the 300 daily flights by



River Blindness

miners smuggling out gold. They are disrupting free movement by the Indians between villages for exchange, feasts or intermarriage. Even the Yanomami's bodies, unfettered by Brazilian clothing, are being redefined by the prospectors as obscene. Pornographic pin-ups and film screenings have transformed the Yanomami houses into what one eye-witness called "nightclubs" for the miners.

Senator Gomes wrote that the village he visited "seems like a scene from the Vietnam War":

"...Every five minutes a plane lands or takes off. The helicopters hover over the jungle...leaving behind a dead environment and dead men."

The FUNAI Post has been abandoned. Medicines and disposable syringes are piled up chaotically and mixed with empty beer cans... The Indians have been abandoned to the prospectors. Altogether a sample of the mess into which our country has been transformed. Disease, malnutrition, infant mortality...

Next to the beginning of the runway, where the planes taxi or take off...is the village house of the Yanomami, once surrounded by the flight of birds and butterflies. The noise now is infernal. It is impossible to talk inside the Indians' dwellings.

After sunset the planes are silent. 'Then,' said an old Indian, 'We have a noise that is much worse: the children who cry all night long. From hunger.'

Senator Gomes was part of a committee called Action for Citizenship that conducted a fact-finding mission to the Yanomami this June. The committee, made up of representatives from legal, scientific, religious and humanitarian organizations, published a widely-read report, *Roraima: A Death Warning*. It corroborated denunciations made to President José Sarney by the Minister of Justice after a field inquiry in January.

These two visits are the only on-site investigations the government has permitted since 1987 when gold panners killed four Yanomami Indians who visited their camp out of curiosity. The government's response was to promptly throw out all health workers, missionaries and anthropologists, alleging they were "inciting the Yanomami." Doves of prospectors were then allowed to overrun the reservation. Protests throughout Brazil led the government to bar Indian supporters from virtually all native territories.

Roraima: A Death Warning condemns the flaunting of Constitutional laws by government officials who condone the violation of Indian rights and promote the gold rush in



Yanomami territory. It faults not only the miners, traders and pilots who are directly involved in "brutally and chaotically invading the area," but concludes that "the invasion...would not have happened and could not be maintained without the tolerance of the government, which has therefore become a part of the conflict...[As] the highest authorities in the region see the problem, they only have to turn a blind eye for the prospectors to do the rest: destroy the Yanomami, devastate the environment, and smuggle out the gold."

Government officials claim they are helpless to stem the tide of invaders and deny any responsibility for the consequences. They have repeatedly broken promises to send in the Army to remove the miners. They now declare it is "too late," "too massive," "too expensive." Action for Citizenship points out that simple measures like enforcing aviation regulations could quickly strangle the gold rush while long-term solutions are worked out. Even minimal steps toward getting the judicial system to function would help. Despite rising violence in the region, there is only one judge for the entire state; in the past six years, there have been only two completed court trials.

Although FUNAI's official mandate is to protect the Indians, it has neither evicted the miners nor enforced the boundaries of the reservation. Instead, bowing to pressure from

continued on page five



Northern Corridor; Yanomami Territory



Airfield in the Northern Corridor

DECIMATION

continued from page one

the miners, politicians, federal agencies and the military, it issued a decree last year to dismember the reservation into an "archipelago" of nineteen tiny "islands" surrounded by "economic zones" of colonists, loggers and miners. The decree reduced Yanomami territory by 70% and left most villages outside the new boundaries. With no land base, the Yanomami are denied the minimum prerequisite for their continued survival. A similar "archipelago" proposal in 1978 led to international charges of human rights abuse brought before the Organization of American States, causing the Brazilian government to retract the proposal—until now.

The state governor, Romero Juca, and local politicians want Yanomami lands to

remain open to mining, claiming it generates needed tax revenues and exports to pay off the huge foreign debt. The national interest, they argue, cannot be sacrificed for the sake of a stone-age minority. However, no tax collectors are stationed at the gold mines, and enforcement is negligible in the city. As a result, less than 15% of gold in the state is taxed.

The Brazilian Conference of Bishops described the government's policies as "genocidal," asserting, "The Yanomami are being massacred as if they were not human beings." Survival International suggests that the new land proposals "may actually be designed to eliminate the Indians, as the Brazilian National Security Council, under the so-called 'Northern Corridor' project, wants to promote major capital investment along the northern frontier of Brazil in the Yanomami area."

Meanwhile, the government masquerades social culpability as natural history. It claims

that in such a big country where citizens exercise "the freedom of movement guaranteed by provision of the Constitution," migrations and colonization are "natural developments [that] frequently lead to conflict between Indians and whites." FUNAI attempts to justify its program as assimilationist by saying, "We can't have the Indians eternally as museum pieces. Our policy is to integrate them so they can have a more human and dignified life." The sudden "integration" of 45,000 reckless gold seekers into Yanomami society has hardly meant a "more human and dignified life" for the Indians.

In January, the United Nations conferred a prestigious Global 500 award (once held by slain rubber tapper Chico Mendes) on Davi Kopenawa Yanomami who managed to evict miners from his village and who vigorously campaigns for his tribe's land rights. Upon receiving the medal, he painted his face with

red *urucu* dye to express his delight at finally meeting powerful people who were on his side. "I'm not going to keep this medal on the wall, but in my heart. In the heart of the Indian and the white man, because it is not just the Indian who is suffering with the destruction of the forest; the white man also suffers." Davi is now threatening to return his medal to the U.N. unless the miners are removed and the reservation reintegrated.

Catherine V. Howard conducted field research among tribes near the Yanomami, and is currently completing her dissertation in the Department of Anthropology. She is a member of the Kayopó Support Group, a U of C student organization active on behalf of indigenous peoples and the environment. All are invited to attend the next Kayopó Support Group meeting on Tuesday, November 28, 8:00 pm, Cobb 116, when action on the Yanomami situation will be discussed.