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In an Almost Untouched Jungle, Gold Miners Threaten Indian Ways

Venezuela seeks to protect an isolated tribe and its land.

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By JAMES BROOKE

Special to The New York Times

KONABUMA-TERI, Venezuela, Sept. 16 — Gripping bows and long, slender arrows — one for shooting animals and one for shooting birds — the Yanomami hunters emerged from the Amazon underbrush today to warily inspect a Super Puma helicopter that had clattered out of the skies into their village.

"No visitors ever came here," Wakamanawa, the head man, explained to Napoleon A. Chagnon, an American anthropologist who speaks Yanomami and was the first non-Yanomami to visit this village in the remote highlands of southern Venezuela.

In two expeditions in the last month, Mr. Chagnon and Charles

Brewer-Cariás, a Venezuelan naturalist, discovered 10 Yanomami villages they say have never before been touched by the outside world. Traveling on foot and by helicopter, they visited three of the villages.

"It will be one of the last such experiences in the 20th century," Mr. Brewer-Cariás said at the end of the expedition today. "We are rapidly approaching the 500th anniversary of the discovery of the Americas, and the Yanomami are the largest uncontacted group in the Americas."

The expedition is part of a Venezuelan effort to survey the Yanomami and their Amazon lands with a goal of creating a tribal reserve. After ignoring the Yanomami for centuries, Venezuelans have been spurred to action by recent reports of physical decimation and cultural disruption of Yanomami in Brazil, where the tribe does not have a reserve. In Brazil, thousands of gold miners entered Yanomami lands in the late 1980's. Recently, the invasion spilled through the unmarked jungle into Venezuela.

Seeking to avert a repetition of the Brazilian experience and to protect Venezuelan sovereignty, Venezuela's Government expelled hundreds of

miners and in June inaugurated an army post to patrol the border area. Venezuela's President, Carlos Andrés Pérez, has expressed interest in creating a tribal reserve to protect a large part of the estimated 14,000 Yanomamis in his country.

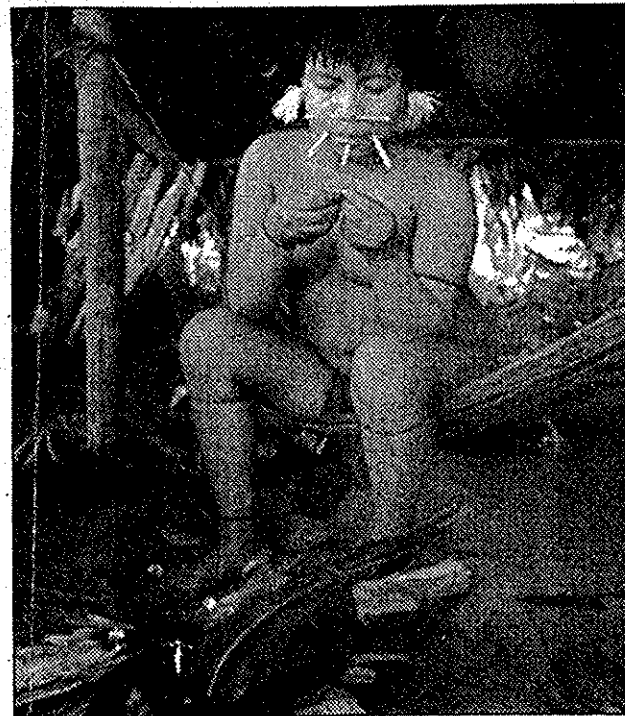
The survey has reached into one of the least explored regions of South America, the Sipapo River Valley.

Lifting off today from Puerto Ayacucho, the capital of Amazonas Territory, the Venezuelan Air Force helicopter quickly left behind a few farm fields clinging to the banks of the Orinoco River. Outfitted with two extra fuel tanks, the helicopter flew due south, toward an area marked on aeronautical charts with "relief data unreliable."

Flying in the several hundred feet of air space between low cloud cover and forest canopy, the helicopter passed black granite cliffs that rose sharply from the forest floor. Below was a sea of rain forest, broken occasionally by chocolate-colored rivers.

Studying a radar survey map, Juan Carlos Ramírez, the expedition's logistician, identified mountain ranges

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Charles Brewer-Cariás

Tribe members at Doshamosha-teri, newly discovered village in Venezuela. Hunter carries a dried monkey.

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Gold Miners Threaten Isolated Indian Tribe

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— some as high as 7,000 feet. Studying the map of the Siapa River, he was unable to discern the mark of modern people on the river valley, which covers about 8,000 square miles.

After a four-hour flight, Konabuma-teri was spotted, cratered in a bowl of mountains about one degree north of the Equator. In late August, the scientists discovered the village after nine hours of criss-crossing the uncharted area by helicopter.

"I had long thought that Konabuma-teri was a mythical village," recalled Mr. Chagnon, who had heard about it in interviews with tribesmen in less remote areas. Mr. Chagnon has studied the Yanomami in Venezuela since 1964.

Stone Age Way of Life

The largely unexplored Siapa River Valley may contain as many as 3,500 Yanomamis, who are widely believed by anthropologists to be the largest tribe in the Americas still living according to Stone Age ways with minimal contact with the outside world. In late August, the scientists visited two other such villages, Doshamosha-teri and Narimobowet-teri.

Biologists now hope to learn more about the native Indians' use of the Amazon's plants and herbs, and anthropologists hope to study the impact on a Stone Age culture of an agricultural revolution produced by the arrival of steel tools like machetes and axes. Today, at the end of his visit, Mr. Chagnon repaid the Yanomami by distributing a dozen ma-

chetes, hundreds of fish hooks and spools of nylon fishing line.

A handful of industrial goods — cloth gym shorts, a few rusty machetes and Brazilian cruzeiro coins — had already entered this "Shapono" or village through trade ties with Yanomamis on the other side of mountain range in Brazil. Otherwise, Konabuma-teri's 94 inhabitants were only vaguely aware of the outside world.

"Satellites passing overhead were believed to be shooting stars," said Mr. Brewer-Cariás, who spent one night watching stars with tribesmen.

"I once saw an airplane high, high in the sky," Wakamanawa, the head man, said pointing to the helicopter. Asked about local hunting conditions, several young men excitedly mimicked the hunt. Stalking with bare feet patting in the dust, they expertly drew back muscular arms and then let loose invisible arrows, exclaiming — "Pow, Pow."

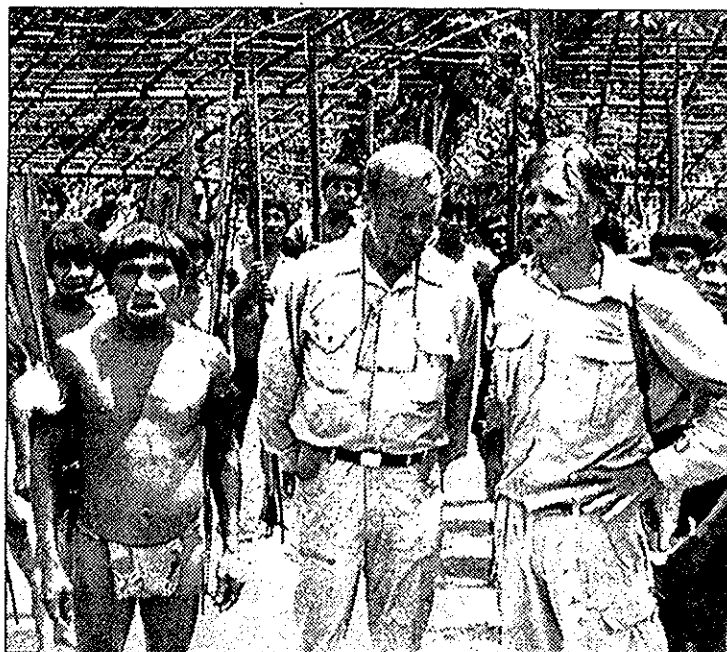
"Tapir, armadillo, wild pig, wild turkey," tumbled out the names in Yanomami of game found in abundance in the mountains and valleys around here.

At a neighborhood garden, still smoking from Indian slash-and-burn techniques, some of the 89 plants cultivated by the Yanomami could be seen: bananas, sweet potatoes, manioc, avocados and tobacco.

Counting Up to 2

Questions about fishing, brought replies of "bruka" or many. The Yanomami numbering system stops at two.

Mr. Brewer-Cariás marveled at the villagers' mastery of their environment. To make a bow, an arrowhead quiver and a set of three arrows, they used two animal species and 17 plant species. They cultivate a strain of



James Brooke for The New York Times

Napoleon A. Chagnon, left, American anthropologist, and Charles Brewer-Cariás, Venezuelan naturalist at Konabuma-teri, one of 10 Yanomami villages that remained isolated from outside world.

manioc that can be eaten raw, without needing to be leached of poisons.

Mr. Brewer-Cariás, a former government minister in Venezuela, has won official support for Mr. Pérez for the survey. The scientists hope that the study will lead to the creation of a "Siapa River Valley Biosphere," an area where the Yanomami can live without interference from gold miners or missionaries.

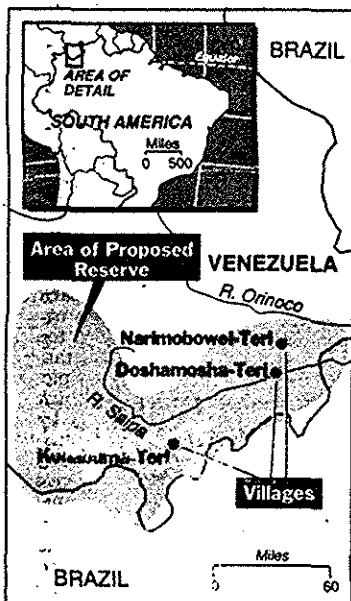
The Venezuelan-American study team is applying for funds to mount a Siapa River Valley research center to be staffed permanently by 10 to 15 scientists, mainly biologists, anthropologists and health workers. Funds for the initial survey came from the

University of California at Santa Barbara, where Mr. Chagnon teaches, and from the Foundation for the Indian and Peasant Family, a private Venezuelan group.

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The scientists hope that the Yanomami Reserve can be inaugurated by 1992, the 500th anniversary of the start of European colonization of American indigenous societies.

"The two continents first met 500 years ago," said Mr. Brewer-Cariás. "We should make a special effort to learn the technologies of a people who have been here for 10,000. This technology is alive now, but it will soon disappear."



The New York Times

Proposed Venezuelan reserve would shelter a tribe that faces disruption in Brazil.