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Indians nearly exterminated in 70s road project retake land, stop loggers



Brasília, October 2 - A federal appeals court in Brasilia decided, on past September 15, that the government must compensate the Panará Indians in Mato Grosso and Pará states in the Brazilian Amazon for material and moral damages suffered when a road was driven through their land in the early 1970s and some 80% of the group died of diseases introduced by outsiders. The decision, upholding a 1997 federal district court decision in the case, marks the first time that the courts have held the government liable for failure to

carry out Indian protection laws. The approximately 200 Panará are to receive more than a half-million dollars in damages.

Numbering perhaps 5 million when Portuguese explorers first arrived in 1500, Brazil's Indians were reduced by wars, slaving and above all diseases to some 200,000 by the mid-twentieth century. The Panará were among dozens of indigenous societies violently affected by the military government's development programs in the Amazon in the late 1960s and early 1970's. Officially contacted by the government only after a road had cut through their territory in 1973, most of the Panará died of the white man's diseases and in 1974, 79 dispirited survivors were removed from their traditional land and sent to a distant reservation. On the verge of cultural and physical extinction, the Panará regrouped, and over the next 15 years slowly reasserted their independent identity.

In 1991, a group of Panará revisited their traditional lands for the first time and found that a large part was reduced to a wasteland by the gold rush and occupied by cattle ranches, but that the headwaters of the Iriri River remained intact. They sought the support of environmental and indigenous rights groups the Fundação Mata Virgem, the Rainforest Foundation and Environmental Defense and reoccupied the area, interrupting its illegal subdivision for sale by a group of ranchers and speculators. In 1993, with the assistance of the Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), the group sued the government for recognition of their land rights and for losses and damages suffered in the disastrous contact. The Minister of Justice declared the 1.2 million acre area theirs in 1996. The 200 Panará currently live in the village of Nansepotiti. The successful representation in court marked yet another landmark in the history of a group brought back from the verge of cultural extinction.

"This historic victory means that indigenous groups whose rights were abused have recourse" said Environmental Defense anthropologist Stephan Schwartzman, who has worked with the Panará since 1980. "It also means that these peoples can hold their government accountable in the future."

Laurie Parise, Executive Director of the Rainforest Foundation stated that: "This decision represents a major victory and illustrates how legal initiatives can be used to create precedent-setting changes in the protection of the rights and lands of indigenous peoples." She added: "After many years of struggle, a terrible injustice has finally been righted".

Photo: Orlando Brito/Instituto Socioambiental-Brasília

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