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Decimated Brazilian tribe wins damages

A Brazilian court has ordered the government to pay the Panará Indians \$330,000, ruling that construction of a road across their land in the 1970s led to a devastating decline in the tribe's population.

The Socioenvironmental Institute (ISA), the São Paulo nonprofit that represented the Panará, says the ruling marks the first time the government has been ordered to indemnify an indigenous people.

"It sets a precedent that other indigenous peoples can use to seek financial redress for actions that result in the decimation of their communities," says ISA attorney Ana Valeria Araujo Leitao.

The federal court ruled the road led settlers, loggers, and miners to the Panará, bringing diseases against which the tribe had no immunity. The defendants—the Federal Indian Agency (Funai) and the government—have announced no plans for an appeal.

At issue was the 1,200-mile (1,900-km), "Transamazonia" highway, a road the government built in the 1970s from Cuiba in central Brazil to the eastern Amazon port of Santarem.

Following construction of the highway, diseases ravaged the tribe, reducing the Panará population from 300 members to just 75. So the government moved the survivors to Xingu Park in the southeast Amazon, where it shelters indigenous peoples facing external threats.

In 1994, ISA sued the govern-

ment to give the Panará back a small part of their land. Eighty Panará returned to their homeland that year; the remaining 100 later joined them.

The government later recognized the area as Panará land. **Follow-up:** Ana Valeria Araujo Leitao, Socioenvironmental Institute (ISA), Brasilia, Brazil, +(55 61) 349-5114, fax +(55 61) 274-7608, avaraujo@socioambiental.org. Tania Barreto, head of legal department, Funai, Brasilia, Brazil, +(55 61) 313-3521, fax +(55 61) 226-8457, procuradoriageral@funai.gov.br.

