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Povos Indígenas no Brasil

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Fears of a 'final solution' as Brazil tackles its last frontier

TWO YEARS after handing over to a civilian administration, Brazil's armed forces have thrown themselves into a new mission to conquer the untamed spaces of the Amazon frontier.

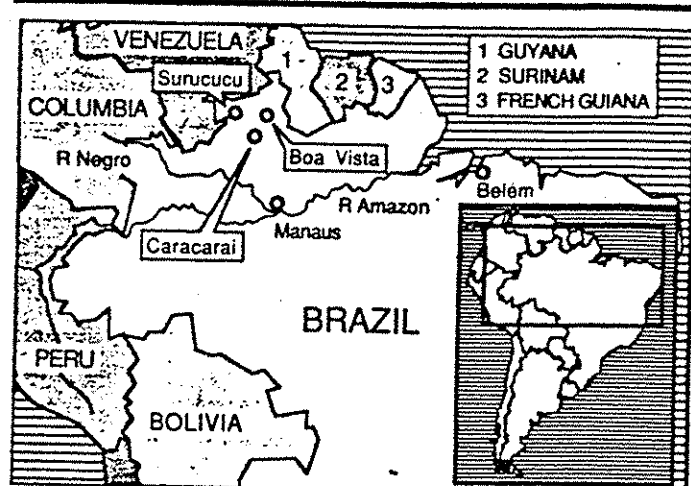
Now that the implicit rivalry with Argentina has ended, military planners are switching their attention to the strategic complexities of a 4,000-mile open northern frontier with six countries, currently watched by just 12 small frontier posts.

To the west, Peru's Sendero Luminoso guerrillas are known to have strayed into Brazilian territory, as have Colombia's M19 fighters, while the unwatched Andean borders facilitate the international drug traffic. To the north, Venezuela and Guyana maintain a territorial dispute, while the military regime in Surinam is considered a destabilising influence. Above all, planners seek to insulate Brazil from Central America's tensions.

Last year the Brazilian National Security Council leaked a secret plan for "development and security" in a huge area covering one-tenth of the country in the headwaters of the upper Amazon — Brazil's last frontier.

The plan is called *Calha Norte* (northern headwaters) and is stirring such intense debate that the armed forces have been obliged to trim their ambitions for economic development and recognise the existence and rights of Brazil's 200,000 surviving Indians. The most isolated groups — including the internationally-known Yanomami who number 8,000 in Brazil — live precisely in

In the first of three articles, Richard House reports from Manaus on how the Brazilian military's plan to colonise the Amazonian jungles poses a threat to the Indians in the region



the *Calha Norte* area. The original plan called for the accurate marking of the frontiers, and the establishment of 10 military frontier posts, each manned by 70 soldiers, with a health centre, a school shop and telecommunications. A new policy for Amazonia's Indians would be a prerequisite to the implicit economic development and agricultural colonisation.

The plan makes no specific mention of building new roads or re-opening the Northern Perimeter, a disastrous 1974 attempt to seal the frontier. Instead, it refers to amplifying the road network, electrification, building new hy-

dro-electric dams and "poles of development".

Development has always followed the army and the destruction of Indian communities is then inevitable. *Calha Norte* will not depend on foreign funding, as did development in the western Amazon, where the government's failure to fulfil contractual obligations to Indian communities prompted a 1985 cut-off of World Bank aid.

No reasonable critic disputes the army's right to patrol the frontier. But a history of shared interests between the army, mining companies and big business during the 20 years of military



Brazil's Yanomami Indians, who face annihilation if a plan to "develop" Amazonia goes ahead.

rule has convinced the Roman Catholic Church that *Calha Norte* is also a "Final Solution" for the Indians sitting inconveniently on Amazonia's mineral wealth.

CIMI, the Indigenist Council of Missionaries, says it is "the tip of the iceberg" of a strategic master-plan to link up Amazonia's existing mega-projects with roads, new hydro-electric dams and settlements — all under the umbrella of "national security" and in defiance of the environment and the rights of Indians.

"This is a means for the armed forces to participate in development and stay in politics," said CIMI's co-ordinator in Manaus,

Guenter Loebens. "The security threat just can't justify the scale of the project and the programmed invasion of Indian areas."

"*Calha Norte* is the crowning of all projects enshrining the vision that the Amazon is a savings bank — you destroy a little more to solve each financial problem without admitting it's part of the planet," said Ailton Krenak, an Indian leader of the Indians' political organisation UNL. "It's just a smokescreen to guarantee good relations between Indians and the mining companies."

The army minister, General Leonidas Pires Goncalves, said

recently: "The project has the objective of mounting security schemes in order to exploit correctly and rationally the mineral riches of the region."

General José Siqueira, chief of staff of the Amazon military command, said neither cross-border insurgency nor tensions with neighbours were the real reason. "Our task is to humanise the frontier — this is not basically a security problem," he said, maintaining that military posts would be serviced by air and no roads were planned.

"There will be and must be a plan for colonisation and mining — otherwise *Calha Norte* wouldn't

have any meaning," said Gilberto Mestrinho, governor of the state of Amazonia.

Though legislation covering the Indians is regarded as excellent, its implementation has been sadly lacking at the hands of Funai, the Indian affairs bureau. Now, because *Calha Norte* involves Funai and offers extra funding for the long-delayed demarcation of Indian lands, its president hopes to extract solid benefits from the military, rather than confirm the worst fears of CIMI.

"Funai was bankrupt as an institution but now it's getting stronger. In the past we acted as a shock absorber in the conflict between whites and Indians — now we are actively participating in policy-making. Under the plan all Indian territory on the frontier will be guaranteed," said Funai's president Romero Jucá Filho.

He said he had received undertakings that the Northern Perimeter Road would not be re-opened during Mr Sarney's government. "Colonisation is already taking place independent of any government planning. Amazonia needs a plan to reduce the damage," he said. The National Security Council has promised him that all military personnel in Indian areas will be subject to Funai rules on health and contacts, and will be withdrawn on its request.

"The army doesn't know the aggressive capacity of the Yanomami Indians," warned a Funai veteran. "They are a warrior nation and if the army misbehaves or allows in outsiders the Indians will kill the soldiers one by one."