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Povos Indígenas no Brasil

Fonte: *The Independent*

Class.: 573

Data: 18.02.87

Pg.: 10

Human cost of Brazil's Eldorado

IN 1596 Sir Walter Raleigh located Eldorado — the mythical city of gold — between a vast inland lake and the Parima range of mountains that divide the headwaters of the Orinoco river flowing north into Venezuela, and the upper Amazon, flowing south into Brazil.

The lake has vanished, but four hundred years later Brazilians have reached the same conclusion. In search of mineral riches they are now determined to penetrate this last undiscovered corner of their country, an area twice the size of Switzerland wedged between Venezuela and Guyana, protected by a belt of tropical forest hundreds of miles wide whose rivers are blocked by waterfalls.

In this sanctuary live the Yanomami Indians, a tribe of about 20,000 straddling the Brazil-Venezuela border who represent the last and largest truly primitive group in the Americas. Their language is unlike any other and their culture was only identified by airborne missionaries in the 1950s. Anthropologists studying the 8,000 Yanomami in Brazil say some totally isolated groups still use stone tools, whilst the first iron filtered in only a century ago.

Rising above the surrounding forest, the cool, scrub-covered hills of Surucucu mark the centre of Yanomami culture with about 3,000 Indians occupying 70 communal huts within a 25-mile radius. But this ridge is also the focus of a modern Eldorado, promising gold, diamonds, uranium, titanium and rich tin ore.

Beside an abandoned airstrip rusts a yellow bulldozer — a relic of the 1975 invasion by hundreds of *garimpeiros*, or independent prospectors, who claim to have extracted about \$200m of almost-pure tin ore from Surucucu before conflicts developed with Indians and the authorities expelled them. Though the entire Yanomami region was closed to outsiders in 1981, some 1,500 gold and diamonds to

In the second of three articles, Richard House reports from Boa Vista on the battle to save the Yanomami Indians from the destruction mining could bring to their homeland.

the north.

But the Indians' present concern is the newly-completed military airstrip that can accommodate large cargo planes, and current work on foundations for a string of military barracks that in April will each house a frontier platoon of 70 men.

Three such military units and four expanded airstrips are planned for Yanomami territory as part of the National Security Council's *Calha Norte*, or "Northern Watershed", plan to seal Brazil's 4,000 mile-long northern border with six Latin neighbours.

But church leaders and pro-Indian groups are convinced the chain of 10 military posts will serve as a bridgehead for eventual civilian occupation by farmers and mining companies, and that *Calha Norte* is as much about colonisation as security.

"We want to live in peace and multiply and preserve our forests — I don't think we can live with the army posts. If we allow them they will build a town and fill up the area, fencing it off to stop us hunting or fishing. No one wants these soldiers bringing cooks or road-workers who pass on diseases," said Davi Xiriana, the best-known Yanomami leader. As head of the Indian post at Demini he saw whole communities die of measles, malaria and flu during a failed 1974 attempt by the former military government to drive through Yanomami territory a Northern Perimeter road, now closed and reverting to forest.

"The presence of the road damaged our health, our traditions and our work," said Mr Xiriana of this first sustained contact with whites.

Romero Jucá Filho, president of the In-

dian affairs bureau, Funai, says the relationship between *garimpeiros* and Indians is predatory and will not be permitted. Funai is also attempting to put curbs on future mechanised mining by companies. "We have taken tough steps to block all authorisation and we will not permit mining in areas where this conflicts with Indian culture," he said.

"The prospectors think we are stupid," said Mr Xiriana, who refused a \$2,000 offer from José Altino Machado, president of the 600,000-strong *Garimpeiros' Union of Amazonia*, to restart mining at Surucucu.

"The known mineral wealth of the Amazon is \$120bn and the Parima mountains have gold, diamonds, tin and rare metal deposits," said Mr Machado, who has grown rich servicing prospectors' camps with his seven light aircraft.

In early 1985 Mr Machado organised an airborne invasion of Surucucu by heavily-armed prospectors, which he says was a protest against the government's decision to grant licences to a mining company, in defiance of an agreement that no one could mine the area.

Mr Machado suspects the *garimpeiros*, like the Indians, are gradually being forced off mineral reserves by big business with powerful political connections. He could be right. Mining ministry documents show 25 companies have been granted prospecting licences in the Yanomami area, including an Anglo-American affiliate and Brascan, a Canadian company whose mining activities elsewhere in Brazil are closely linked with British Petroleum's.

In Boa Vista, Getulio Cruz, the governor of Roraima territory in which the

Yanomami area is situated, said lobbies pushing for the creation of a closed Indian reserve are acting on behalf of international interests that want Brazil's minerals to stay underground and so prevent them further depressing world prices.

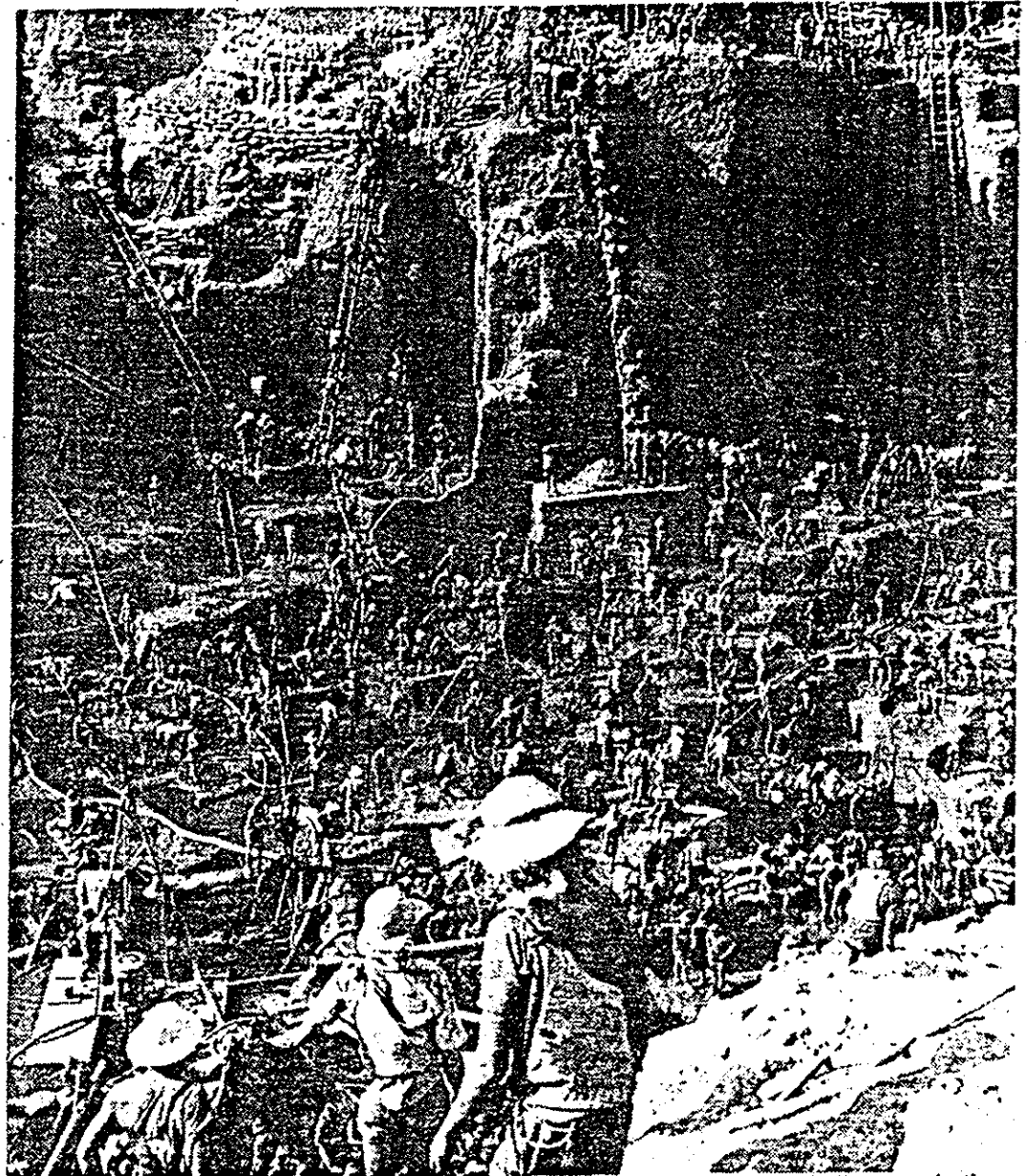
"They want to preserve the strategic value of minerals to use them when there's a world shortage — not for the Indians' good," agrees his brother Salamão Cruz, director of Roraima's state planning company. Despite evidence that the steep slopes and acid soil can barely sustain the Indians' shifting agriculture, Mr Cruz also says the area has "high potential for cattle grazing".

Almost all Roraima's 100,000 white population have some links with mining, and tradesmen in Boa Vista speak nostalgically of the days when a weekly cargo jet came to collect Surucucu's wealth.

"There's a phenomenal coincidence between Indian areas and geological riches. We're sitting on top of the money needed to develop this region, so we think the area should be opened to mining companies," says the acting president of Roraima's commercial association, Celio Fonseca.

But Eldorado remains elusive. Only two partial surveys have been carried out and the results were disappointing. The state-controlled company, Docego, concluded it would be uneconomic and politically impossible to extract Surucucu's wealth for years to come. "The perspectives in the short term are not good and due to the Indian problem all surveying has stopped," said Francisco Canuto de Araujo of the mining ministry.

This is just as well. "The extraction of minerals would be the death of the Yanomami as people, though the royalties might sustain a handful like princes. The only word to use is genocide," said Carlo Zaccchini, an Italian missionary who has worked in the region for 20 years.



The Serra Pelada mine, scene of one of Brazil's earlier Amazonian gold-rushes. Indian organisations fear the disease, violence and environmental destruction mineral exploitation brings in its wake.