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Fighting talk on Brazil's final frontier

SEATED on a fallen log in the forest clearing where the Yanomami Indians plant bananas and manioc beside their *maloca*, or communal hut, the headman known as Jose voiced his people's concern that their centuries of isolation have ended.

"I don't like it. I became very worried when they told me many people would be coming here," Jose told a translator in his guttural language. In 1975 he welcomed the first invading mineral prospectors, but later led attacks on their camps when rivers were polluted and the flow of presents ceased.

He is unhappy about the new airstrip and the army barracks near the village and warned that if the outsiders who use them — be they farmers, miners or soldiers — disrespect the Yanomami way of life, his warriors would not hesitate to attack.

Said Davi Xiriana, another Yanomami leader with a clearer grasp of white civilisation: "We have to remain on our own — we don't need to mix with the whites. We have been told of plans to populate the area and grow crops. I've heard too there is a plan to expel the Indians from the frontier but they cannot do this because the land is ours."

Brazil's 6,000 Yanomami Indians have the misfortune to live close to the Venezuelan frontier and on top of fabled mineral deposits. The army is now exercising its right to patrol the frontier, and development has reached Roraima, the remote northernmost territory that contains a fifth of Brazil's 200,000 surviving Indians.

The Indians are worried by accounts of how a government plan for development and security in Brazil's northern frontier regions called *Calha Norte* (Northern Watershed) will affect their traditional livelihood.

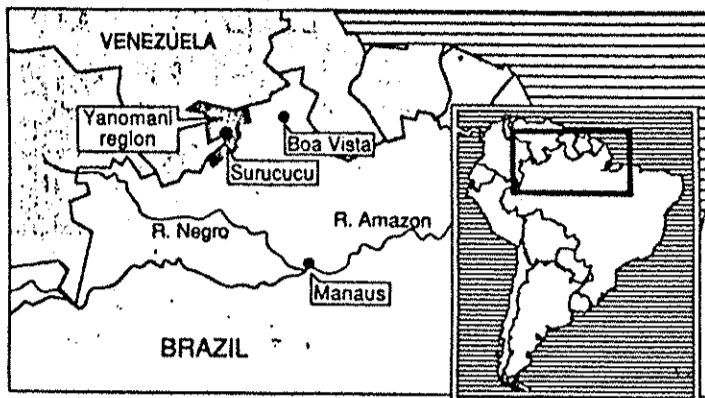
The first government report on the National Security Council's plan, to install three military frontier posts in Yanomami territory, promises it will be "socially just and ecologically correct, respecting the peculiarities and characteristics of Amazonian cultures".

No mention is made of new roads or farming settlements, but in Amazonia, colonisation has always followed the army and destruction of Indian communities is then inevitable.

"The area is almost completely unoccupied — our project is to humanise the frontier," said General Jose Biqueira, chief of staff of the Amazon Command in Manaus. "If there is a mission to establish settlements or mining in the region, we have been told nothing about it; but there are plans to research the area's economic potential," said Roraima's military commander, Colonel Souza Holanda.

Although the area is a third the size of Britain and has been provisionally closed to outsiders since 1981, the Yanomami are not yet protected inside a legally-constituted reserve.

Concluding his three-part series, Richard House reports from Surucucu on the anger felt by the Yanomami Indians, who are struggling to retain their identity as white civilisation spreads further and further into their territory.



Yanomami Indians in their village in northern Brazil: focus of concern as their isolation ends.

Since 1979 the Commission for the Creation of a Yanomami Park (CCPY) — an independent group financed by the Norwegian government and a well-known British charity — has been pushing for legal recognition by the government's Indian affairs bureau, Funai. CCPY wants a combined ecological and Indian sanctuary.

"We believe the Yanomami will survive and their numbers may even increase. But they do not have to go on living in total isolation. They wish to change as everything in history changes and progresses," said CCPY's co-ordinator, Claudia Andujar, a photographer who has testified to UN commissions on the Yanomami's behalf.

"They have to maintain their identity as a people. This is what we must fight for and the international community can help by understanding that people have a right to live as they wish, and that the destruction of their ecosystem is a loss for all humanity," she said.

"We want them to adapt without being exterminated; it will

take them some generations to progress from the stone age to the satellite age. We want gradual changes to resist disease and acquire knowledge of our world," said Carlo Zacchini, an Italian missionary and CCPY colleague. CCPY has enlisted the support

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of Senator Severo Gomes, who has a bill proposing the park before Congress. Mr. Gomes recently received undertakings from President Sarney to create a park by decree, once national security problems relating to the frontier have been resolved with the army. "We have a great chance of success. I think it's very possible legislation will come this year, but the government must

also strike a balance with the interests of those in Roraima," said Mr. Gomes. CCPY hopes a 38-mile wide band covering two thirds of the area will be declared a zone of "permanent preservation".

At the Funai post in Surucucu, a steady stream of Indians from outlying villages visits the infirmary to receive treatment for epidemics brought by the white man — measles, flu, TB and sexually-transmitted diseases. Those who visit the post have a voracious appetite for Western medicines but so far no more than 2,000 Indians have been vaccinated.

To reach the post, Indians travel for days from outlying villages composed of groups of communal huts, or *malocas*. There they hunt, fish and gather from the forest, practising shifting cultivation of bananas and manioc root in clearings whose fertility is exhausted within five years.

The Yanomami, who bear a striking physical resemblance to rural Japanese, shun the use of clothes and adorn their bodies with feathers, flowers and red urucum dye.

They hunt with bows and arrows, which are also the weapons of constant inter-group warfare resulting from raids to avenge sickness among tribal leaders. The Indians attribute this to witchcraft by rival groups, although the true cause is almost always white epidemics.

"The ideal would be for there to be no contact, but that's impossible, so we need the maximum care and respect to avoid dramatic and fatal results," said Francisco Bezerra de Lima, who has worked in the area for 20 years and is head of the Funai post at Surucucu.

"I don't personally believe the Yanomami should evolve. They're satisfied. What's being promised is to take them out of their habitat and make them beggars in modern society."

"The government is afraid that if it does nothing there will be an international outcry, while if it decrees the park, local politicians will protest," he said.

"I'm not against the Yanomami park — we must protect the Indians," said Getulio Cruz, governor of Roraima. "But there are ideological problems. There is nothing to stop those who today defend the preservation of the Indians as though creatures in a zoo, from one day trying to declare an independent Yanomami state in this land of great mineral riches. As Brazilians we cannot calmly accept this."

The government's report also speaks of "local and foreign pressures to create a Yanomami state out of Brazilian and Venezuelan territory". This argument is ridiculed by all Indian support groups who say that although the Yanomami frequently cross the border, the two groups are treating their problems quite separately.

Other critics say the figure of 8,000 Indians has been inflated by missionaries and anthropologists and that villages occupy only a tiny fraction of the area. They say the park area should be reduced or divided into "islands" among development zones.

But after months working in the area, Pierrette Birraux-Ziegler, a Swiss geographer from the University of Geneva, has found that the entire region is crossed by a network of paths constantly used by the Indians for migration, hunting and trading visits to other villages. "You can't say that where there's no hut there are no Indians," she said.

Studying one community of 60 people, she found the Indians had migrated 29 times in 60 years, occupying 180,000 acres of forest. She also found that rapid population growth was forcing communities out of the highlands and eastward to the limits of the proposed park. "They are growing rapidly and will occupy all the empty spaces," she said.

By April the soldiers will be on patrol, and in coming weeks the Yanomami chiefs plan a meeting to discuss their response.