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## Povos Indígenas no Brasil

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### Primitive tribe battles cultural extinction

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A gold rush in the Brazilian wilderness has led to fierce battles between itinerant prospectors and one of the most primitive tribes on earth.

Brazilian Catholic Church officials and private conservation organizations reported last month that thousands of miners, intruding on the habitat of the Yanomamo Indians in search of wealth, are threatening the native tribe with cultural extinction and diseases more typical of developed societies.

The miners may also be damaging the world's largest rain forest as they comb the area for surface deposits of gold and minerals, experts say.

Missionaries in the region said three miners and four Indians have been killed in clashes involving land disputes.

The mayor of the town of Boa Vista, caught in a power struggle among wealthy groups backing the prospectors, was slain. The governor of Roraima Territory, the site of the struggles in northwestern Brazil and the region in which Boa Vista lies, was charged with his murder and subsequently resigned.

"The Yanomamo are people who live as most people did 10,000 years ago. They are an important link to our past," the Rev. John Saffirio, an anthropologist, said in a telephone interview from Boa Vista.

The tribe, which has as many as 20,000 Indians, was discovered only in the last century in an area about as large as the state of Connecticut. Many of them still hunt with bows and arrows, work with stone tools and dress only in feathers and flowers.

#### An abyss

"There is an abyss between the Yanomamo and the rest of the world," said Father Saffirio. "The miners, by invading the Yanomamo territory, are forcing them into that abyss. They are bringing diseases that the Indians have no resistance to and a way of life that will destroy the Yanomamo culture."

Father Saffirio, who is one of the world's leading authorities on the Yanomamo, manages a network of Catholic missions established to protect the tribe from outside influence. Several of the missions, which offer health care to the Indians, were closed by Brazilian authorities when the Yanomamo and the miners began fighting in August.

Medical missions operated by the Commission for the Creation of a Yanomamo Park were closed by military officials, who also expelled doctors and nurses from the region.

Pedro Rodrigues, spokesman for the Brazilian Embassy in Washington, said that the doctors and nurses had been expelled from the Yanomamo territories for their own safety.

Since early September, the government and the military also have prevented journalists from entering the region.

The military has temporarily taken control of the Yanomamo region from civilian officials, who normally have the job of protecting the Indians. Soldiers have now begun removing miners, who will not be allowed back into the territory, according to Roelof Sa, spokesman for the government's National Foundation for Indian Assistance.

#### Last-minute claims

Father Saffirio is worried that business interests and prospectors, anticipating that a new Brazil Constitution, which is now being written, will restrict development in Indian lands, are staking last-minute claims to large areas.

The Indians, known for their fierceness, could confront the miners in more bloody battles or succumb to disease and acculturation, he said.

International conservation groups are warning that the expulsions will leave the Indians and the delicate rain forests open to harm.

The fighting and expulsions highlight the challenge that Brazil faces as it seeks to exploit the forest while protecting the environment and the region's indigenous people. A decade-long land rush, combined with ongoing foresting, has claimed millions of acres of jungle and pushed the Indians deeper into the jungle.

During the last year the government has opened up more of the jungle with an ambitious military project called *Calha Norte*, or Northern Headwaters. *Calha Norte* involves the construction of a network of airstrips and military bases in the jungle to secure the border and support police action against drug traffickers believed to operate in the areas bordering Venezuela and Colombia.

Government officials have estimated that the mineral wealth beneath the forest floor is enough to repay Brazil's \$111 billion foreign debt — the world's largest. "The foreign debt in Brazil and in many other Third World countries contributes to the pressures that lead to environmental damage," said Mark Plotkin, an ethnobotanist with the World Wildlife Fund.

He said that debt-ridden governments often are too eager to realize the profits from mining, foresting and farming in tropical areas.

"In the long term, they turn the forest into desert and lose an asset that could have gone on forever," he said. International lending agencies, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, are considering programs that would erase portions of a nation's foreign debt in exchange for conversion of rain forests to national preserves. "A program like that would protect the resource and take the pressures off," said Plotkin.

In the meantime, free farmland is attracting thousands of settlers to the Amazon region, outside the Yanomamo territory.

Agricultural projects have had limited success because much of the region's soil is unable to support continuous farming. Efforts to use modern farming methods have left the jungle spotted with burned-out patches of land abandoned by settlers.

"The Indians, who work small patches for brief periods and then leave them fallow for decades, are able to farm the tropical soil successfully without pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

Brazil's record in managing the forest "is spotty at best," said William Burley, analyst with the Washington-based World Resources Institute. Many environmental groups have applauded the country's careful management of a huge iron-ore project on the eastern edge of Amazonia, but they are critical of the many small, less controlled projects that are scattered across the region.

Amazonia stretches more than 2,000 miles from Venezuela through central Brazil. In addition to being important sources of pharmaceutical compounds and other useful materials, such forests help stabilize the global environment by producing moisture and gases for the atmosphere. A decline in the annual rate of rainfall in the Amazon region has been blamed on the loss of vegetation caused by development.

Many Yanomamo still live in the most remote parts of the jungle, hunting, fishing and scavenging. They have a warrior culture characterized by territorial battles and fierce fighting over women.

Although new highways have brought modern clothing and customs to some Yanomamo, many still cling to traditional ways of life. And as the clashes with miners have shown, the Yanomamo can pose a danger to intruders as well.