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Povos Indígenas no Brasil

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Amazon jungle doomed, missionary fears



GIOVANNI SAFFIRIO
Gold rush imperils natives

By HARVEY SHEPHERD
of The Gazette

The march of civilization promises to be no blessing for the Amazonian jungles of Brazil and their inhabitants, says a missionary who has worked in the area.

"First the Indians will be lost," Rev. Giovanni Saffirio, a priest of the Italian Consolate Missionaries, forecast in Montreal yesterday.

"Then the animals will be lost. Then the forest will be lost. Then, when there is no forest, it will be another Ethiopia."

Saffirio was expelled last August from a mission post where he had been working since 1968 among Yanomamo Indians.

The Yanomamo — there are about 8,000 of them on each side of

the Brazil-Venezuela border — wear almost no clothing and use bows and arrows. Saffirio fears they will soon be extinct.

They are already being ravaged by such diseases as measles and whooping cough that came, first with a road project in the mid-1970s, then with a gold rush.

Now they and their environment are threatened by a byproduct of gold mining — mercury pollution.

Saffirio said that to reduce the amount of gold washed away during panning, imported mercury — an average of 1.7 kilograms for every kilogram of gold recovered — is added to the slurry. This binds the gold into an amalgam that sinks in the pan. The mercury is later burned off.

Saffirio said cases of mercury

poisoning have begun to show up in Boa Vista, a local capital where he, a lay brother and two nuns, all of the Consolata community, went after being expelled from a station where they provided services, largely medical, to fewer than 400 scattered Yanomamo.

Saffirio said the closing of his mission station followed an outbreak of violence at a gold-panning site between outside miners and Yanomamo.

Following that, government authorities said all outsiders would have to leave a large area reserved for the Yanomamo. But the edict was enforced only for the missionaries — there are more outside gold miners than ever.

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