

CEDI

Povos Indígenas no Brasil

Fonte: The Standard Class.: 684Data: 13.04.88 Pg.: _____

Gold rush threatens Brazil's primitive Indians

By STEPHEN POWELL

SAO PAULO (Reuter) — Gold prospectors pushing through Brazil's Amazon frontier lands are threatening with extinction the last primitive nation in the Americas, Indian rights activists say.

A gold rush has attracted about 10,000 "garimpeiros," or gold panners, to the forests of the Yanomani Indians in the mountainous northern territory of Roraima.

It is the first big invasion of the remote Yanomani lands and Indian rights groups fear that annihilating disease will follow in their wake, as it always has done in the tragic history of Brazil's Indians.

Violence is also a threat.

A murderous clash last August between garimpeiros and the Yanomani left four Indians and two prospectors dead. The violence prompted the government Indian agency Funai to try to expel the garimpeiros, but without success.

"The Indians are frightened of the garimpeiros, because they remember the deaths last year," said Roelof Sa, a Funai spokesman.

He said about 100 small planes were now operating out of the Roraima capital of Boa Vista, many taking gold prospectors into Yanomani country.

Following last August's killings, Funai tried to starve the garimpeiros out of the roadless area by banning flights over Yanomani lands.

But gold prospectors secured a court injunction guaranteeing pilots the right to fly into the region.

Prospecting in Indian lands is illegal and theoretically Yanomani region is out of bounds to the garimpeiros.

Since last August missionaries and Indian rights campaigners have been barred from the area.

Claudia Andujar, co-ordinator of a pressure group working for Yanomani rights, said: "We were told by Funai that it was

dangerous for us to go on working there because of the conflicts. Our three medical teams were barred and we were asked to leave the area immediately."

In January a protest telegram was sent to President Jose Sarney saying the Brazilian government was watching with its arms folded "the genocide and extinction of the last great indigenous people recently to be contacted."

The authorities deny the charge of genocide, but Funai acknowledges that the risk of disease spreading among the Yanomani is considerable.

The great migrations of garimpeiros — there are about half a million in Brazil's jungles — are helping to spread malaria.

A newspaper quoted Funai official Francisco Bezerra de Lima in Yanomani country as saying that about 50 Indians had died of disease since the arrival of the garimpeiros.

The Yanomani are the biggest tribe of forest Indians left in South America. Besides the 9,000 in Brazil, 11,000 are on the Venezuelan side of the border.

All other major Indian nations have been destroyed by contact with Europeans.

In Brazil, the Indian population has dropped from an estimated two million to three million when the Portuguese arrived in 1500 to 220,000 today.

Some Brazilian Indians have learned to travel to the super-modern capital of Brasilia and perform war dances outside the presidential palace when they have a grievance.

Last year Kaiapo Indians from Para state did just this after the government suggested dumping nuclear waste in their part of the vast Amazonian jungle. The government relented.

The Yanomani have not learned such techniques.