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Povos Indígenas no Brasil

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Death and Democracy in Brazil

By Terence Turner

The battle to save an Indian nation in Brazil's rain forest has gone beyond the struggle to save a people. It has turned into a fight to save Brazilian democracy. When President Bush meets with President Fernando Collor de Mello in Washington today, he should heed bipartisan Congressional advice and not pass up the chance to discuss the plight of the Yanomami people.

In a dramatic gesture on Brazil's Day of the Indian in April, President Collor announced that he was revoking the decrees issued in 1988 and 1989 by his predecessor, José Sarney, that had taken the Indians' land and made it available for mining.

But those who had been following the situation viewed Mr. Collor's statement with skepticism. After all, the move came 18 months after the Brazilian courts had declared the decrees illegal.

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Moreover, in the same speech, the Brazilian President postponed giving the Yanomami legal title to the land for six months in order to allow the Government to restudy the question of the boundaries of the Indians' country. This hardly seemed necessary: in 1985, the Brazilian Government, after a thorough study, had

officially marked these borders.

The ambiguities of President Collor's statements reveal the extent to which Brazil is still dominated by the military and business forces identified with the military dictatorship that yielded power in 1984. Despite the euphoria after his election a year ago, Mr. Collor has been unable to carve out a policy independent of these interests and has been politically weakened by the collapse of his economic program. The struggle

the next 10 years. Many of their communities have already lost all the children, and fertility rates have dropped dramatically. The Federal Prosecutor of Brazil has denounced the Government policies responsible for this tragedy as "genocidal."

The Sarney decrees, which gave rise to the situation, were clearly unconstitutional under Brazil's 1986 democratic Constitution, which guarantees to indigenous people land needed to sustain their cultural way of life. Why, then, has the popularly elected Collor Government waited until now to take its first, timid step toward undoing this horror? And why is another study of Yanomami boundaries needed, unless Mr. Collor is hoping to use it to further dismember the Indians' territory?

Bush should fight for the Yanomami.

over the Yanomami land represents a challenge by the old forces to the constitutional authority of the new democratic regime.

This challenge is embodied in a vast clandestine military project, Projeto Calha Norte (the Northern Headwaters Project) that places northern Brazil — 15 percent of the country — under military control. This is land that would be returned to the Yanomami under the court order. Secretly approved by President Sarney in 1985, the largely secret project is aimed at reshaping environmental and Indian policies in the interests of "national security."

This means, in principle, the massive exploitation of the natural resources of Amazonia to support the development of the rest of Brazil. Such a move would certainly force the assimilation of the Yanomami through the settlement of their land by ethnic Brazilians.

The gold rush of thousands of miners made possible by Mr. Sarney's decrees has already seriously damaged the Yanomami. The outsiders brought malaria, and the destruction of forest habitat has led to starvation. The Yanomami are dying at a rate that will annihilate their entire population (almost 10,000 in 1986) within

The Bush Administration should make future aid to Brazil contingent on Mr. Collor's insuring that the Yanomami retain their constitutional rights. The fate of these Indians has become an issue of historic importance for Brazil. The Yanomami, however, cannot wait for history. If they are left to die while the Government temporizes, Brazilian democracy may suffer a mortal wound. □



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