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The Matses

Population The Matses Indians live in the tropical lowlands of eastern Peru and western Brazil. There are about 1000 of them, the majority living in Peru. They seem to have turned the demographic corner: after suffering the usual depopulation from contact with outsiders, their numbers are growing.

Food The Matses live by hunting, fishing and horticulture. They hunt with bows and with shotguns. Their gardens are large, often more than 100 yards long. The main staple crop is yuca (also called manioc or cassava). Plantains (cooking bananas) and corn are also important, as are the large number of minor crops used for food, decoration, medicine and material.

Houses Typical houses are large with 30 to 100 inhabitants. A log and pole frame is covered with woven thatch. Mat walls divide the interior so that separate families have rooms.

Contact From the early part of the twentieth century to 1969, relations between Matses and outsiders were hostile. Hostilities began during the rubber boom, the rush to the Amazonian forests that resulted in the deaths of many thousands of native people. Since then, the Matses have raided and been raided, keeping most outsiders from their territory. The culmination of the period was a 1964 expedition that included armed men, followed by bombers and U.S. Marine helicopters that evacuated the wounded. Since 1969, missionaries have been with the Matses in Peru and raids have ceased.

Brazilian Colonization Brazilians are colonizing the Yavari River, including the heart of Matses territory.

Peruvian Land Law Peruvian law (The Law of the Jungle and Native Communities) provides that native people have a right to the land which they have used traditionally. The Matses received title to their land provisionally in 1973. In 1976, Mr. Romanoff provided a report to the Ministry of Agriculture confirming the Matses use of the land.

Current Situation After the establishment of peace and the provisional land grant, the situation of the Matses has changed from promising to threatening. Latest reports indicate that:

- the Matses land title has not been finalized and is not likely to be finalized
- a colonization project is proceeding that includes all of Matses territory; the project is funded by the Swiss government (Jenaro Herrera project) and the Peruvian government
- local authorities know nothing of the provisional land title and their planning maps show Matses territory as open to colonization
- the whole program of land grants for native peoples has slowed and almost stopped

- wood cutters with army authorization have moved into Matses territory
- Matses men confronted the wood cutters; though they carried shotguns, there was no violence
- local authorities visited the Matses and told them that they must break up their longhouses and live in small family units
- those Matses who have experimented with wage labor have received no payment or torn clothing

Treated justly, the Matses will be important agents for the long-term development of the Peruvian Amazon region. They are hard working, resourceful, desirous of peaceful relations with outsiders. They will be an important part of the multi-ethnic Peruvian society.

If they are treated unjustly, they will contribute nothing to the Peruvian nation or the development of the region. The current situation threatens a return to the pre-1969 confrontation. The Matses cannot win such a war. They, be turned from independence to fugitives or oppressed slaves.

What is Needed

A new government is being elected in Peru. This government will have to define its relation to native peoples. What is needed are:

- Peruvian and international expression of concern for the situation of native people, particularly the Matses
- technical and financial support for Peruvian government programs of granting land titles, with support coming from the Peruvian government and from international development institutions
- adequate considerations of the rights of native people in all development projects, both Peruvian and international.

About Mr. Romanoff Mr. Romanoff spent two years in eastern Peru. He speaks both Spanish and Matses. He is employed by AMARU IV, a Washington based consulting firm, and he works with Survival International U.S.A.