

MISSIONARY REPORTS ON EMERGENCY AMONG INDIANS

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CEDI - P. I. B.  
 DATA 05/09/86  
 COD SRD 07

(Pastor Zwetsch, an IECLB missionary, is working among the Suruis Indians in Rondônia, Brazil, carrying out educational and agricultural projects.)

In 1977 the land of this tribe was measured and assured legally to the Suruis, nevertheless this action alone has not avoided the moving in of settlers. In order to avoid this, far-reaching action has to be undertaken.

According to the settlers, only two families lived in the reservation when the area was demarcated. It would have been easy to resettle them. But neither the Indian agency (FUNAI) nor any other governmental office undertook anything. So it happened that already in September 1978, less than one year after the demarcation, more than 150 settler families were in the reservation of the Suruis. Ever more settlers are arriving. The Indian agency knows of this development but ignores it. In July, this year, the number of settler families climbed to over 200. This process has gone out of control and leads to growing tension between the intruders and the Indians.

The Suruis don't accept these conditions passively. They know that the assurance of their reservation is vital for them. By the Indian agency, they hear only that they have to stay calm and patient. But they are tired to being put off. They start acting in their own way.

Conflicts between intruders and Indians have happened from the beginning of this process. On both sides have occurred deaths.

The village Espigao do Oeste, 35 km from the town of Pimenta Bueno, is located in the middle of the reservation. There a process develops that has happened at other places before: white settlements are built on the site of former Indian villages.

Ten years ago there have been more than one thousand Suruis, nowadays they are reduced to at the most 300, though in the last two years the birth rate has increased a little.

This year at least two serious events have taken place when Indians from this tribe attacked settlers. At their last attack on July 19, a group of Suruis has haunted various settlers houses and has stolen household goods, tools, arms, food. The smallholders were warned that they should go out. ("Here is the land of the Indian. A long time ago there were a lot of woods, a lot of pigs, a lot of apes, a lot of 'tatus'; now the Suruis have to search a long time to find animals for hunting. Therefore the Suruis enter the house of the 'Yara' (white man) and take pigs and beans away.") At this opportunity alone the Indians have taken out of the house of one of the richer settlers 15 sacks of beans, worth Cr.\$ 9,000.

There is no doubt why the Indians are fighting. They fight for their land. They fight for their woods where they draw their living from. The white intruders destroy their living space and disregard the needs of the Indians.

The problem has to be seen, however, in its context. It is related to the failure of the respective governmental agencies whose settling policy is wrong-directed. Nowadays, only in Rondônia is estimated that about 23,000 families have no land. The towns which are springing up raise the crime rate, the prostitution, the unemployment, the slums. Most of the families have moved to Rondônia, attracted by the dream of getting there cheap land. The land reform could represent a solution but the government postpones it, undertaking pseudo-solutions like the moving to the North of great human masses.

The Suruis hope that the Indian agency puts through at once the expulsion of the intruders. Legally the Indian agency has the means in hand to do it, because it even may call the army to undertake the removal of the settlers without troubles. But the Indians don't wait passively for a change, they act in their way and show that "this land already has an owner."

Of course the poor white intruders have a right to their own land. Land is not wanting in Rondônia, it has only been occupied by the great land owners.

SAO PAULO, Brazil, Oct. 11 (lwfi)--A meeting of Lutherans and Methodists who work among Brazilian Indians has called for the autonomy of the Indians on their reservations.

The meeting, sponsored by the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil (IECLB) and the Methodist Church, sent a letter proposing that an Indian reservation be established for the Yanomamis tribe. The letter, sent to the Brazilian interior minister and to the president of FUNAI, the Indian agency, charged that the present policy of giving the Yanomamis "islands" of land rather than a whole reservation "contradicts the Indian laws, according to which the social, economical, cultural and territorial unity of the Indian areas should be maintained in order to warrant their physical and cultural survival."

The letter concluded: "So the Church pleads that a unique Indian reservation should be created to comprise the actual living space of the Yanomamis. In such a guarded area they could preserve their cultural values and approach step by step the white culture, an indispensable process."

The meeting, entitled "The Evangelical Presence at the Internal Boundaries of the Country," included the same participants that attended a course on Indian issues here.

The group also committed itself to engage "in the developing of the native culture and changing of the present situation." It approved a document based on the concerns of missionaries and pastors of the IECLB, the Methodists and also the National Federation of Presbyterian Churches.

This proposal attacked government policy that supports migration into Indian lands in Northern Brazil, and it sided with the Indians in their clashes with settlers.

"The following cases may show the emergency of the Indians," the document notes. "More than 200 families have moved into the reservation of the Suruis in Rondônia; from time to time conflicts break out between both groups. The land of the Araras and Xikrins in Para State is endangered by lumbermills and settlers. Also in Posto de Guarita reservation in the State of Rio Grande do Sul colonists have settled in."

One of the missionaries reporting to the group, the Rev. Roberto Zwetsch, noted that these conditions have lead to fighting: "There is no doubt why the Indians are fighting. They fight for their land. They fight for their woods where they draw their living from. The white intruders destroy their living space and disregard the needs of the Indians." (A ccomplete text of Pastor Zwetsch's report follows.)