

The Perimetral Norte and the Yanomami Indians.

28 July 1978

It has come to our knowledge that the construction of the Northern Perimeter highway (a road that accompanies Brazil's northern frontier) will rebegin immediately. This road cuts into the territory presently occupied by the Yanomami Indians, at the Catrimani and the Demini rivers.

The stretch of road under consideration starts in the town of Caracarai and continues through the state of Amazonas to the town of São Gabriel da Cachoeira; its construction was begun in 1974 but was interrupted for some time.

The constructor responsible ^{was} ~~is~~ Camargo Correia, a very large Brazilian construction firm. At the time work was begun the road cut directly into the territory of the Yanomami, passing close by two villages, of the Opiketheri and Wakathautheri (Yanomami subgroups). The Opiketheri, who lived about 10 kms. from the road, moved immediately next to it. The Wakathautheri, located at 3 kms. from the road, maintained their village at this distance as the Catrimani mission (Consolata missionaries urged them to do so. However, during highway construction the Indians abandoned their roças (gardens), preferring to be near the tractors, their operators and the peoões (manual laborers). As a result, the Indian's food supply diminished considerably that year; and as always happens, the first epidemic of measles as well as 11 cases of influenza were registered. In 1977 a second measles' epidemic, a consequence of the existing highway, wiped out 76 Indians, half of the population of three villages near the Catrimani river.

In 1975, the highway had reached a point 245 kms. from Caracarai (this town is in the Territory of Borama, north of Manaus). At the request of the Catrimani Mission, a FUNAI control post was installed at kilometer 47;

beyond that point, unofficially, the land was considered as the Indian's for their normal hunting necessities.

Up until a month ago, however, there had been no official demarcation of Yanomami territory, despite many requests over the years. The suggestion of various anthropologists was to make a Yanomami reserve for the approximately 6000 Indians that compose this group on the Brazilian side of the boarder. The proposed reserve would have covered 22.700 square kilometers.

In July of 1978 a Brazilian newspaper (O Estado de São Paulo) published the news under the heading Indians gain 16 new areas. This indicated that the FUNAI had not approved the idea of one large reserve, defended by anthropologists but had instead created 16 smaller areas in the Territory of Roraima and the State of Amazonas, totalling about 13.500 square kilometers, for this group of 6000 Indians. According to the President of the FUNAI, General Ismarth de Araujo Oliveira, the idea of one single reserve would have meant that virtually all the area of the municipalities of Boa Vista in Roraima, and São Gabriel da Cachoeira, in the state of Amazonas, would have been invaded. The Yanomami Indians are as yet quite primitive and certain groups are only now entering into contact with Brazilian society.

The decision to create 16 reserves dividing the Yanomami land is the result of suggestions made by COAMA, an agency headed by general Dimocrito, with the local assistance of the sertanista (an explorer employed by the FUNAI) Sebastião Amancio, recently dismissed by the FUNAI's Boa Vista office.

If the construction of the Northern Perimeter Highway is reinitiated as confirmed by General Dimocrito of the COAMA, three Yanomami villages (about 150 indians) will have to be immediately relocated. This is what COAMA and the Territorial Government of Roraima are hoping for. Once more the Indians are losing a hopeless battle.

We are seeking the support of international organizations to help us intervene in the problem of land for the Yanomami. The Ministry of the Interior, together with COAMA, should restudy the plans for the highway in function of the Indians' territory. Their land should be united and demarcated according to the needs of this large ethnic group at the mercy of "civilization".