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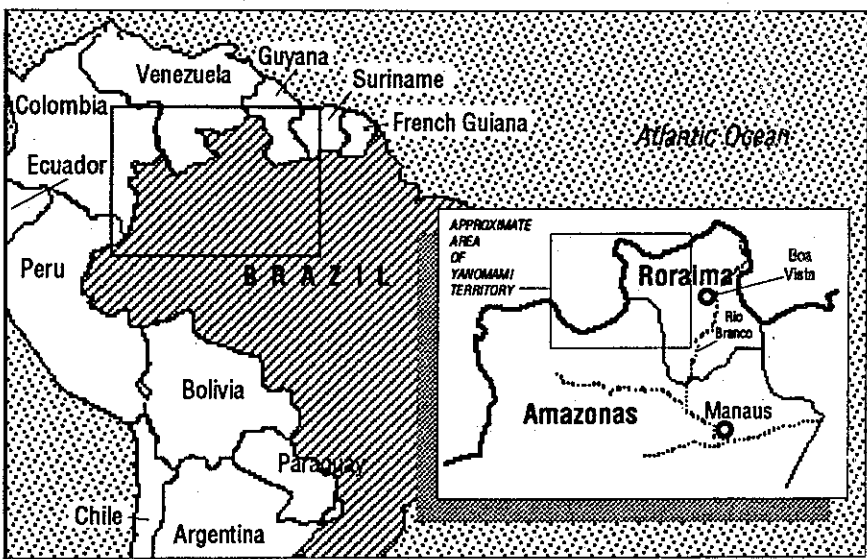
The Yanomami Indians: Decimation in Brazil

by Catherine V. Howard

(Dec. 10) Events are rapidly heating up in Brazil over what to do about the 45,000 freelance gold panners who have invaded the territory of the Yanomami Indians over the past two years. With scenes reminiscent of some latter day Wild West, the massive gold rush is causing innumerable deaths among the Yanomami by epidemics, massacres and mercury poisoning. Having little contact with the non-Indians until the 1970s, the estimated 20,000 Yanomami, of whom 10,000 live in Brazil in the Northern state of Roraima, form the largest unacculturated tribe left in the Americas. They are now the victims not only of the gold miner's guns, diseases and chemicals, but of Brazilian government policies that have encouraged the invasion.

Pressure on the government to take action is intensifying from all quarters: indigenist advocates, human rights groups, lawyers, anthropologists, environmentalists, church leaders and the United Nations. In September, record numbers of Indians from eighty different tribes, joined by sympathizers from the public, marched in the streets of Brasília, Manaus and Boa Vista to protest government complicity in the decimation of the Yanomami.

Even certain sectors within the Brazilian government are in revolt. In October, the Public Prosecutor's Office lodged a Federal court action against the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), the Environmental Agency (IBAMA) and the Republic as a whole. It charged them with failing to uphold Constitutional provisions guaranteeing



land rights to native groups and prohibiting mining or development on their lands unless they are consulted and hearings held in Congress.

The Federal Judge hearing the case, Novelty Vilanova, found the Prosecutor's arguments convincing. On October 20, he ordered FUNAI and the Federal Police to evict the miners and to restore the legal boundaries of a unified Yanomami reservation. Senator Severo Gomes, who saw first-hand

the condition of their villages, said, "The alternative, leaving the situation as it is, mean the final solution to the problem of the Yanomami: extermination."

The Governor of the state of Roraima, Romero Jucá, has declared he will resist the Federal court decision and will support the miners. The miners' union entered a countersuit against the Federal ruling, at the same time threatening "civil war" and retaliation

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against the Yanomami if any attempt is made to remove them. Signs that they may make good on this warning came in early November, when renewed violence broke out.

The government is prohibiting investigative teams from entering the area, but cannot legally forbid entry by other Indians, so spokesmen from other tribes rushed to the area to monitor events: Ailton Krenak (Union of Indigenous Nations), Marcos Terena (Nucleus of Indigenous Rights), and a Kayapó delegation including, among others, Paiakan (organizer of the Altamira Conference of Indigenous Peoples), and Mokuka, a video cameraman who is documenting the situation. Kayapó support for the Yanomami struggle has been strong and visible ever since Yanomami representatives came to Altamira in February to join the Kayapó's successful fight against the hydroelectric project that threatened their lands.

The ongoing assault on the Yanomami includes deadly epidemics of measles, influenza, malaria and tuberculosis brought in by miners. In some villages, 90% of the population are slowly losing their eyesight from onchocerciasis, or "river blindness." The Yanomami have had too few years exposure to Western diseases to have built up any natural biological immunity; vaccines and medicines are crucial. Yet FUNAI, the official Indian bureau, expelled medical personnel from the reservation two years ago; only after the Federal court ruling, with a malaria outbreak of crisis proportions, did it send in a health team — too under-equipped to be able to treat anyone. For the 35,000 Indians of the state of Roraima, FUNAI maintains only two doctors in Boa Vista, the capital city, and a small "health facility" that lacks quarantine wards, adequate medicines and equipment, and even minimal sanitary standards. By November, sick and dying Yanomami were reported to be arriving at the facility at a rate of ten per day — they being the few who

managed to make the journey out of the bacteria-bloated reservation. Some advocates call for the International Red Cross to send in emergency medical teams.

Chronic malnutrition, unknown before the invasion, is weakening a population already vulnerable to foreign diseases. In lands that once supplied plentiful food, the Yanomami are now barely able to get enough to eat each day. The prospectors' planes have frightened away their game and their guns have killed off those remaining. Their mercury, used as a quick-panning technique to separate gold particles from dirt and silt, has poisoned off the fish and caused irreparable environmental damage.

The dangers of mercury are not confined to the Yanomami territory. Once it enters the food chain, it passes from species to species and eventually to humans, with cumulative effects that cause birth defects and death. Scientists report that mercury carried down stream has now reached the Rio Branco, a major tributary of the Amazon River, and is headed towards Manaus, a city of one million people. Yet the Brazilian government does nothing to regulate the use of mercury. Gold prospectors have dumped some 145 tons of mercury into the Amazon River since 1979. Some neighboring countries are considering diplomatic measures to halt the poisoning of their rivers by miners operating in the headwaters of Brazil. Since mercury is burned as part of the gold-panning process, a certain percentage is released into the global atmosphere, still in a toxic form.

The impact of the gold rush on the Indians includes intense cultural damage. The Yanomami are traditional hunter-gatherers and horticulturalists with a rich religious life, egalitarian society and simple material culture. Few have ventured out of their homeland, learned Portuguese or adopted habits of the surrounding national society. The hordes of armed intruders are now tearing the Yanomami from their way of

life. Village clearings, one animated by rituals and daily tasks, are now dominated by airstrips. Pilots make 65 to 130 daily flights to the 126 clandestine runways opened by miners to smuggle out the gold. They are disrupting free movement by the Indians between villages for exchange, feasts or intermarriage. Even the Yanomami's bodies, unfettered by Brazilian clothing, are being redefined by the prospectors as obscene. Pornographic pin-ups and film screenings have transformed the Yanomami houses into what one eyewitness called "nightclubs for the miners."

Senator Gomes wrote that the village he visited "seems like a scene from the Vietnam War": "...Every five minutes a plane lands or takes off. The helicopters hover over the jungle...leaving behind a dead environment and dead men.

"The FUNAI Post has been abandoned. Medicines and disposable syringes are piled up chaotically and mixed with empty beer cans... The Indians have been abandoned to the prospectors. Altogether a sample of the mess into which our country has been transformed. Disease, malnutrition, infant mortality...

"Next to...the runway where the planes taxi or take off...is the village house of Yanomami, once surrounded by the flight of birds and butterflies. The noise is infernal. It is impossible to talk inside the Indians dwelling.

"After sunset the planes are silent. 'Then,' said an old Indian, 'We have a noise that is much worse; the children who cry all night long. From hunger.'"

Senator Gomes was part of a committee called Action for Citizenship that conducted a fact-finding mission this June to the Yanomami and neighboring Roraima tribes. The committee, made up of representatives from legal, scientific, religious and humanitarian organizations, published a widely-read report: "Roraima: A Death Warning." It corroborated findings of a January

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Runway used by the miners in Yanomami territory. From "Ro-

photo: Renato dos Anjos/ Ag. Estado

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visit made by the Minister of Justice, contained in a report sent directly to -but ignored by-- President José Sarney.

These visits are practically the only on-site investigations the government has permitted since 1987 when gold panners killed four Yanomami Indians who visited their camp out of curiosity. The government's response was to promptly throw out all health workers, missionaries and anthropologists, alleging they were "inciting the Yanomami." Drove of prospectors were then allowed to overrun the reservation. Protests throughout Brazil led the government to bar Indian supporters from virtually all native territories.

"Roraima: A Death Warning" condemn the flaunting of Constitutional laws by government officials who condone the violation of Indian rights and promote the gold rush in Yanomami territory. It faults not only the miners, traders and pilots who are di-

rectly involved in "brutally and chaotically invading the area," but concludes that "the invasion...would not have happened and could not be maintained without the tolerance of the government, which has therefore become a part of the conflict... [As] the highest authorities in the region see the problem, they only have to turn a blind eye for the prospectors to do the rest: destroy the Yanomami; devastate the environment; and smuggle out the gold."

Government officials claim that they are caught helpless to stem the tide of invaders and deny any responsibility for the consequences. They have repeatedly broken promises to send in the Army and to remove the miners. They now declare it is "too late," "too massive," "too expensive." Action for Citizenship points out that simple measures like enforcing aviation regulations could quickly strangle the gold rush

while long-term solutions are worked out. Even minimal steps towards getting the judicial system to function would help. Despite the rising violence in the region, there is only one judge for the entire state; in the past six years, there have been only two completed court trials.

Although FUNAI's official mandate is to protect the Indians, it has not tried to enforce the boundaries of the reservation. Instead, bowing to pressure from miners, politicians, federal agencies and the military, it issued a decree last year to dismember the reservation into an "archipelago" of nineteen tiny "islands" surrounded by "economic zones" of colonists, loggers and miners. The decree reduced the Yanomami territory by 70% and left most villages outside the new boundaries. With no land base, the Yanomami are denied the minimum prerequisite for their continued survival as a people.

Land is their guarantee of subsistence, social reproduction, religious and economic practices, cultural identity and protection from exploitation and disease. A similar "archipelago" proposal in 1978 led to international charges of human rights abuse before the Organization of American States, causing the Brazilian government to retract the proposal — until now. Whether the federal court ruling of October 20 ordering the restoration of the original Yanomami reservation does any good remains to be seen.

Governor Romero Jucá and local politicians want Yanomami lands to remain open to mining, claiming it generates needed tax revenues and exports to pay off the huge foreign debt. The national interest, they argue, cannot be sacrificed for the sake of a stone-age minority. However, no tax collectors are stationed at the gold mines, and enforcement is negligible in the city. As a result, less than 15% of the gold in the entire state is taxed.

The Brazilian Conference of Bishops described the government's policies as "genocidal," asserting, "The Yanomami are being massacred as if they were not human beings." Survival International suggests that the new land proposals "may actually be designed to eliminate the Indians, as the Brazilian National Security Council, under the co-called 'Northern Corridor' project, wants to promote major capital investment along the northern frontier of Brazil in the Yanomami area."

Meanwhile, the government masquerades social culpability as natural history. It claims that in such a big country where citizens exercise "the freedom of movement guaranteed by provision of the Constitution," migrations and colonization are merely "natural developments [that] frequently lead to conflict between Indians and whites." FUNAI attempts to justify its assimilationist program by saying, "We can't have Indians eternally as museum pieces. Our policy is to integrate them so they can have a more human and dignified life." But the sudden "integration" of 45,000 reckless gold seekers

into Yanomami society has hardly meant a "more human and dignified life" for the Indians.

Last January, the United Nations conferred a prestigious Global 500 Environmental Award (once held by slain rubber trapper Chico Mendes) on Davi Kopenawa Yanomami who managed to evict miners from his village and who vigorously campaigns to preserve his tribe's land. Upon receiving the medal, he painted his face with red urucu dye to express his delight at finally meeting powerful people who were on his side. "I'm not going to keep this medal on the wall, but in my heart. In the heart of the Indian and the white man, because it is not just the Indian who is suffering with the destruction of the forest; the white man also suffers." Davi is now threatening to return his medal to the U.N. unless the miners are removed and the reservation reintegrated.

* * *

News Update (Dec. 27): To comply with the recent federal court ruling, President Sarney signed an executive order on December 12 authorizing the gradual removal of the 45,000 miners from Yanomami territory. The first

contingent of Federal Police Agents are reportedly scheduled to go in during early January, unless supporters of the miners find ways to delay the operation.

* * *

Editor's Note: The New York Times (January 21, 1990) reports that beginning in early January, 6 medical teams were sent into Yanomami territory by FUNAI, while Federal Police have taken steps to remove some miners and impede the flow of supplies to others. At the same time, the Brazilian Justice Minister has reportedly made a deal with angry miners "allowing" them to prospect for gold in more than 2,500 square miles of Yanomami land, also considered to be Brazilian National Forest. Organizations supporting the Yanomami and neighboring indigenous groups have denounced the agreement as threatening the sovereignty of the two-thirds of Yanomami land currently classified as National Forest, and not sufficiently addressing the questions of the environmental and cultural destruction wrought by the miners.

Meanwhile the majority of the miners have remained in their illegal camps, some expressing the hope that the incoming government of Fernando Collor de Mello, a "free-market conservative" who will take office in March, will support their cause.

Book Review

Report from the Frontier: The State of the World's Indigenous Peoples. By Julian Burger. 310 pages. Zed/Cultural Survival, Inc. \$15.00.

By Juan J. R. Villartas-Robles

In 1969 the Indonesian Government, with the cooperation of the U. S. Government and the United Nations, officially annexed West Papua, the western half of the island of New Guinea. Since that time, the native West Papuans (about one million people) have experienced a continuous process of dispossession and persecution in the name of "progress" and "nationhood." Multinational corporations such as Texaco, US Steel, Philips and Shell rushed to exploit the oil, timber, minerals and other resources of this small country that is roughly the size of California. Those few aborigines who worked for the corporations did so under conditions of virtual slavery; the rest became prisoners in their own villages. Since 1969, all manifestations of the natives' cultural identity have been harshly repressed or treated with scorn. In 1984 the Indonesian Government initiated a program to resettle landless Javanese peasants on West Papua's most fertile land. The aborigines are today a minority in their own territory.

The native West Papuans' dramatic experience closely resembles that of many other indigenous peoples throughout the world, who number in all over 200 million, or 4% of humankind. In *Report from the Frontier*, Julian Burger tells their story while discussing the various factors that shape it: political, cultural, economic and environmental. This story unfolds in four parts. Burger starts by providing the reader with an overview of colonialism and its deep and complex impact, still at work, on indigenous peoples. He then supplies detailed accounts of the experiences of the tribal societies of Mexico

and Central America, South America, Asia, Africa, the "rich countries" (the US, Japan, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), and the "socialist countries" (the USSR, China, Mongolia and Nicaragua). Next, Burger deals with the role played by the World Bank and the multinational corporations in the exploitation of the world's marginal areas, its "Frontier." Finally, Burger traces the United Nations' policies regarding tribal peoples, as well as the contributions made by sympathetic institutions in the West: churches (both Catholic and Protestant) and an increasing number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The "Frontier" that national governments, international corporations and the World Bank want to "develop" and "integrate" into the wider society of present-day nation-states happens to be the homeland of indigenous peoples. In adopting this term, "indigenous peoples," Burger rejects the evolutionist and paternalist attitude underlying that worldwide scheme. Under current international law, the term "people" implies the right to exercise self-determination. National governments which deny their indigenous societies self-determination (those of India and Brazil, for instance) prefer other terms, such as the vague "populations."

The present state of most of these "populations" is alarming. Throughout the world, particularly where market forces reign supreme, the indigenous peoples are among those suffering most from policies of national assimilation, political repression, or outright genocide implemented by the governments under which they live.

Governments, multinational corporations and the World Bank justify their conquest of "the Frontier" by pointing to the inevitability of "progress" (as they understand it) and the idea that some cultures (namely, theirs) are better than others. Burger confronts these assumptions by providing ample evidence of the rationality of

many economic systems branded as "primitive" (e.g., those of the rain forest dwellers in the Americas), while demonstrating that "development" and "integration" translate for many indigenous peoples as environmental disaster and human misery. The worst scenarios are those threatening the native peoples of Amazonia, the Maya Indians of Guatemala, the Aché of Paraguay, the peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, and the Melanesians of West Papua.

In recent decades, these and other indigenous peoples have begun to fight back in various ways and with different results. The Kayapó, who stood up to incursions on their land rights, are not alone in their struggle and victories. The Free Papua Movement (OPM) has been fighting the Indonesian Government since 1965. Unfortunately, successful cases of resistance are still the exception rather than the rule.

The worldwide plight and resistance of indigenous peoples are attracting the attention of a growing audience in the industrialized nations. International support for tribal peoples has been instrumental to some recent victories, including significant policy changes by the United Nations. In 1982, the U.N. set up the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, in which Burger has been involved. In 1986, it sought to replace International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 107 of 1957, an assimilationist policy which had called for the "integration" of the indigenous peoples "into the life of their respective countries." A revised version of the convention questioning the legitimacy of national integration and protesting the abuse of tribal peoples in the name of development was adopted last June. Further changes in the ILO Convention 107 are still being heatedly debated.

Burger ends his book with a call to the citizens of the industrialized nations to respond actively to the causes of indigenous peoples. Although the struggle must always be led by the in-

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indigenous peoples themselves, they need allies who will lend them support: financial; political—by promoting their right to exercise self-determination; and intellectual—by explaining to the world that the inevitability of “development” is a fallacy and that indigenous peoples have a great deal to teach the rest of humanity.

Burger's *Report from the Frontier* is highly recommended. It can be ordered from Cultural Survival, Inc. at 11 Divinity Ave., Cambridge MA 02138, (617) 495-2562. Cultural Survival has a large selection of excellent books, magazines and materials concerning the struggles of indigenous peoples. Cultural Survival catalogues and selected publications, including Burger's Report, are available from the Kayapó Support Group.

The Kayapó Support Group was formed in Chicago in 1988 inspired by the efforts of the Kayapó Indians of Brazil to organize an alliance of indigenous Amazonian nations in opposition to the Brazilian government's plan to build a series of huge hydroelectric dams on the Xingu river. Our aim is to effect our own alliance of activists concerned with issues of human rights, the environment and the cultural rights of indigenous peoples, and committed to: a) educating ourselves and the public about the current crisis in the Amazon in a way that keeps in view the multiple political, ecological and cultural contexts of the situation; b) serving as a parallel support group, mouthpiece, international witness and national pressure group in the U.S. for the Kayapó

and other native peoples by ensuring that international attention remain focused upon their rights as indigenous peoples; and c) promoting a thorough rethinking of our roles as citizens of the U.S. as it pursues political and economic policies of complicity in the plight of Amazonian peoples. In its first year of work the Kayapó Support Group has offered a series of educative forums and events in the Chicago area and supplied speakers and teaching materials to related groups in other U.S. cities.

For additional information about the Kayapó Support Group meeting schedule, or to arrange for speakers, write to: The Kayapó Support Group, Ida Noyes Hall, University of Chicago, 1212 East 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, or call (312) 947-8018.



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