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Subject: VENEZUELA: YANOMAMI BIOSPHERE RESERVE

WORLD RAINFOREST MOVEMENT

* Note: this information sheet is based on preliminary data. As soon as more information emerges, updates will be issued. Please treat this information as provisional.

INFORMATION SHEET

12 JULY 1991

VENEZUELA

NEW BIOSPHERE RESERVE FOR THE UPPER ORINOCO

A very large new 'Biosphere Reserve' has been established in the Upper Orinoco, in Venezuelan Amazonia. The new 'Reserva de Biosfera Orinoco-Casiquiare' encloses a total area of some 83,000 km². Final publication of the Presidential Decree, which has already been signed and which establishes this 'Area Bajo Regimen de Administracion Especial' is expected shortly.

Proposals to provide a regime of special protection for the area have been under discussion in Venezuela since 1980, when the notion of a Biosphere Reserve for the Upper Orinoco was first raised. Impetus for the idea gained ground last year with repeated intrusions into the area by Brazilian miners who have been panning for gold in the upper reaches of the Orinoco and Matakuni rivers.

These invasions have created serious problems for the 21,000 Yanomami Indians, whose lands straddle the Venezuelan-Brazilian border. In Brazil, the invasion by miners has led to some 1,500 Yanomami Indian deaths from introduced diseases. A survey carried out in May 1991 showed that 50% of the Indians in the headwaters are suffering from malaria. The cross-border mining invasions have brought similar problems to the Venezuelan Yanomami.

The new Venezuelan Biosphere Reserve, which embraces a large part of the territories of the Yanomami and Yekuana Indians, includes the greater part of the Upper Orinoco area. The reserve extends as far west as the watershed between the

Cunucunuma river and the Ventuari river, and to the west bank of the Casiquiare, as far south as the Pasimoni River up to its source on the Brazilian border, which makes up the south and eastern limits of the Reserve.

The Reserve is a composite made up of several other protected areas. Two National Parks, that were established in the 1970s and 1980s, now fall within the embrace of the Biosphere Reserve. The two National Parks - Duida-Marahuaca and Sierra de Neblina - are high mountain regions, essentially uninhabited though occasionally entered by Indians for the collection of plants for special use such as canes for blowguns.

The Biosphere Reserve also encloses three 'Monumentos Nacionales' established, along with a large number of others outside the new Reserve, by Decree 1,233 on 18 January 1991.

The small areas are there to protect three other 'tepui' - high sandstone mesas - 'Vinilla-Aratitiope', 'Sierra Unturan' and 'Serrania Tapirapeco-Cerro Tamacuari'.

The entire eastern half of the Biosphere Reserve, is in addition designated as the 'Parque Nacional Parima-Tapirapeco'. It encloses the basins of the Matakuni river, the Mavaca, the Upper Siapa as far west as the Sierra Neblina National Park. This area encloses a large part of the Yanomami Indians of the Upper Orinoco.

Apparently, the Decree establishing the National Park, which was thought necessary as it permanently prohibits mining in the area, makes special provisions to allow the Yanomami to continue their traditional economic activities.

The Biosphere Reserve is to be managed by a large UNESCO-supervised commission, which is to include Indian representatives, under the authority of the Autonomous Service for the Development of the Federal Amazon Territory (SADA-AMAZONAS). SADA-AMAZONAS was set up by the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources by Decree Nº. 272 of 9 June 1989. It is associated with a new research centre being built at La Esmeralda - the Amazon Center of Environmental Research 'Alejandro Humboldt'.

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