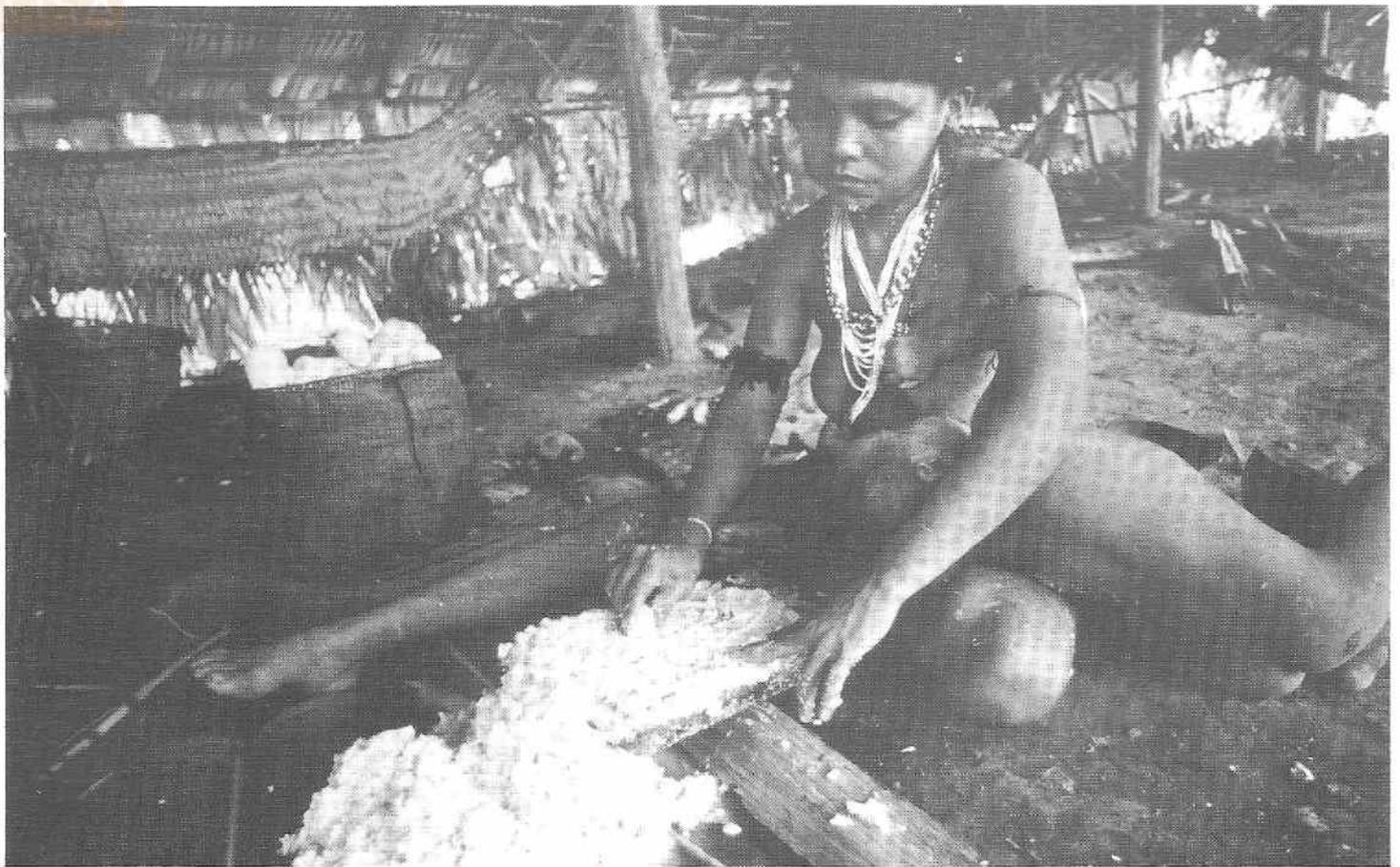


**In defence of the
Yanomami
People**

*A statement by the bishops of Brazil and
the Indigenist Missionary Council (CIMI)*

Church in the World 26



Preface

The situation of the indigenous populations of Brazil deserves and requires the collaboration and solidarity of all Brazilians. The Yanomami people, who live in Roraima and areas of the state of Amazonas, are going through a time of extreme risk to their survival, threatened as they are by the continuing invasion of mineral prospectors and other groups who wish to extract timber and minerals.

FUNAI, the official government protection agency, has unfortunately been unable to defend indigenous land effectively, and has placed at grave risk the future of the culture and population of the Yanomami people. The Catholic missionaries in the area of Catrimani were unjustly expelled in August 1987, leaving the Indians with even less protection. The Brazilian bishops' conference, hearing the cry of the Yanomami people and of the missionaries devoted to them, cannot refuse to become involved, and is uniting its efforts with those of other groups to defend this people and obtain from the government a guarantee of the demarcation of the land and the preservation of the Yanomami people.

This implies the immediate rescinding of Interministerial Order 250 of 18 November 1988, which not only divided Yanomami territory into

19 sub-areas within two forests and a national park, but provided that the forests and the park should not be for the exclusive use of the Indians.

The executive of the bishops' conference and the Episcopal Pastoral Commission, in response to the appeal of the Permanent Council, regard the situation as serious and send an appeal to the people of Brazil to come to the aid of the Yanomami people as soon as possible.

We hope that this document, short though it is, may alert people of goodwill to redouble their efforts to ensure that the indigenous populations of Brazil survive in dignity.

+Luciano Mendes de Almeida
President of the Brazilian Bishops' Conference

1 Introduction

Violence against the Yanomami is part of the general pattern of the Brazilian government's policy towards indigenous peoples, which marginalises and fragments indigenous communities to the point of provoking ethnocide.

1. Official indigenous policy has in recent years been consolidating the

practice of depriving indigenous peoples of the basic conditions necessary for them to maintain their identities and, in many cases, even their physical survival.

2. Economic groups led by greed for new opportunities of profit, particularly the extraction of minerals and timber, have not hesitated to invade and plunder indigenous land.

3. This situation is particularly dramatic in Amazonia, which is seen by government planners as 'empty space', still awaiting occupation. In this space the Indians are regarded as obstacles to the projects of big capital in the northern frontier regions of Brazil.

4. For groups in the government, 'the real policy towards indigenous peoples is the incorporation of the forest-dwellers into the national community', according to the studies prepared by Subdivision 3 of the General Secretariat of the National Security Council (in 1988 renamed the Advisory Secretariat on National Defence (SADEN/PR). This policy seeks to force Indians to lose their identity and to detach them from their traditional lands, which would then become available for economic exploitation.

5. Although the new Brazilian constitution contains wideranging and clear guarantees for the rights of indigenous peoples, there is no sign that the government is attempting to

change current indigenous policy, still less that it is prepared to reconsider the actions which have already been taken against the human, cultural and political dimension of the indigenous peoples.

6. Recent government actions against the Yanomami people were carried out with striking callousness and will end by bringing about the extinction, pure and simple, of one of the largest indigenous peoples, who still preserve intact their traditional culture in the modern world. Never in the whole of their history have the Yanomami faced a greater threat than this.

7. Faced with the imminent extermination of the Yanomami, the church, exercising the prophetic dimension of its mission, calls on all Brazilians to give a practical demonstration of their solidarity with the cause of the indigenous peoples, and of their commitment to the physical and cultural survival of this people.

2. The Yanomami

The Yanomami are one of the largest indigenous peoples who still maintain their culture intact.

8. The Yanomami number 9000 in the Brazilian states of Amazonas and Roraima, occupying the frontier area between Brazil and Venezuela. Their occupation of northern Brazil is proven historically by Indian oral tradition and by the reports of scientific expeditions from as early as the 18th century.

9. The territory occupied by the Yanomami is hilly, with rivers flowing over waterfalls, dense equatorial forest and clearings with sparse vegetation. This region, known as the Maciço das Guaianas, is one of the most ancient geological formations of the South American continent.

10. The soil is unsuitable for intensive agriculture, but the Yanomami have been able to survive for centuries and preserve the natural resources and the ecological balance. They ensure the periodic evacuation of used areas to allow the soil, flora and fauna to regenerate. They transfer their *malocas* or communal houses to new areas of the forest every three or four years. In this way the forest has an opportunity to rebuild itself and to be reused by future generations of Yanomami.

11. Until 1959 the Yanomami were in a process of unchecked demographic and territorial expansion. From the 1950s various religious missions began



to establish themselves in the area, including the Evangelical Mission of Amazonia, the Brazil New Tribes Mission and the present Roman Catholic dioceses of Rio Negro and Roraima.

12. From 1970 FUNAI posts were established in the area, as part of the National Integration Programme launched by the Medici government. In 1973, with the construction of the Perimetral Norte road (BR 210), which cuts across the south-eastern part of the area, the Yanomami were seriously affected by diseases — smallpox, influenza, tuberculosis and venereal diseases — brought by the deforestation teams.

13. In 1983 the incidence of tuberculosis among the Yanomami in Roraima was four-and-a-half times the expected rate in the general Brazilian population (24 per 10,000 as opposed to 5.2 per 10,000). Changes in cultural practices also contributed to the deterioration of the health of the Yanomami. The incidence of river blindness, responsible for thousands of cases of blindness in Africa and America, was also increased extraordinarily among the Yanomami, in some areas affecting the whole adult population. The Yanomami people are still being poisoned by consuming water contaminated by mining.

3. Invasion

The peaceful Yanomami people in Roraima are threatened with extermination by invasions of miners, whose numbers totalled 100,000 by December 1988.

14. From 1975 onwards the Radam-Brazil project revealed the existence in the Yanomami area of strategic and precious minerals such as uranium,

cassiterite and gold. However, the Vale do Rio Doce company, after carrying out geological surveys, decided that mineral extraction in the area was inappropriate.

15. As a result of the publication of the findings of Radam-Brazil, a mineral rush took place in the then Territory of Roraima and the state of Amazonas. Yanomami land began to be invaded by prospectors from all over Brazil, encouraged by the press and groups interested in mineral extraction.

16. The Serra de Surucucus, with the greatest concentration of Yanomami, has been the area most targeted by prospectors and miners because of its deposits of cassiterite, iron ore and uranium, although the Vale do Rio Doce company is against mineral extraction in Yanomami territory.

17. In 1985, in a criminal operation by the vice-president of the Association of Prospectors and Goldpanners, the Serra de Surucucus was once again invaded, with the use of aeroplanes, arms and the support of landowners and politicians. This invasion led to the setting up of a police investigation by the Roraima Federal Police Department, which brought charges against its leader, who, however, still remains unpunished.

18. In 1986, encouraged by the lack of any action against them, the organisers of the earlier invasion assembled more prospectors, with greater logistical support, for a new intrusion into Yanomami territory. In 1987 the invasion intensified, and there were armed conflicts between invaders and Indians, resulting in a number of deaths. As this new invasion was taking place, the Constituent Assembly was discussing measures to encourage prospectors' cooperatives, which were to receive priority in concessions for prospecting and mining workable mineral deposits in the areas in which



they were operating.

19. In September 1987 FUNAI, together with the army, airforce, and the Federal and Military Police of the Territory of Roraima, began an operation to remove the prospectors from the Yanomami area, which, however, ended in failure. The action merely helped to encourage the prospectors to return to indigenous land.

4. Crimes

The invasion of Yanomami land is contrary to the Constitution and to Brazilian law, and yet it is being repeated with impunity.

20. The actions involved in the invasion of Yanomami territory constitute crimes proscribed in Brazilian penal law such as robbery, homicide, criminal injury and the formation of gangs or bands. Taken together, these actions performed against an ethnic group constitute the crime of genocide. Reports of such crimes were published by the press:

5. The Press

Roraima's press has direct responsibility for the dramatic situation of the Yanomami.

21. The seriousness of the acts of violence practised against the

50,000 men expected in Roraima after failure of attempt to remove prospectors (*Folha de Boa Vista*, 13-16 Dec 1987)

Four Yanomami Indians have been brutally murdered by gold prospectors. One prospector died in the clash. The bodies of the Indians were completely mutilated by gunshot wounds and blows from knives and sticks, presenting a grim picture of human perversity (*A Crítica de Roraima*, 22 Aug 1987)

New Indian deaths in clash with gold prospectors (*A Crítica de Roraima*, 30 Apr 1988).

An Indian woman wounded by rifle-shot and three men beaten in another clash with gold prospectors (*A Crítica de Roraima*, 8 May 1988). On 8 May 1988 a Yanomami child was murdered by gold prospectors in the arms of its father, who was seriously wounded, in an attack on the Tireytheri settlement. After houses and gardens were destroyed the Yanomami were evicted from the site.

Eight Indians killed in the invasion of a Urubutheri village (*Folha de São Paulo*, 20 May 1988).

Yanomami makes it impossible for the press in Roraima to ignore them. Nevertheless the local media reflect economic and political designs on indigenous land, to the point of encouraging invasions and publishing slanders on the bodies which defend the cause of the Indians, especially the Catholic Church.

22. The acting governor of Roraima told the press on 13 December 1987 that he was keeping the invasion under observation and not worried by it because he 'regarded the problem of the gold-prospectors as a consequence

of the situation of the country, a social problem'.

23. The governor of Roraima also stated on 8 January 1988 that, if it were left to him, all the mine workings then in operation would be maintained and legalised. In the governor's view this would contribute to the development of Roraima and would benefit the Indians themselves. The governor maintained to the bishop of Roraima that he was unable to prevent the entry of prospectors into areas rich in minerals (28 October 1987).

6. Calha Norte

The defence of Brazil's northern frontiers, which is an inescapable duty of the state, cannot become a pretext for violating indigenous rights.

24. In 1986 Brazilian society discovered that the General Secretariat of the National Security Council had prepared a plan for the development and security of the region to the north of the watersheds of the rivers Solimões and Amazonas. This became known as the Calha Norte project.

25. The General Secretariat of the National Security Council listed a series of measures which it judged necessary for the establishment of the project. Of particular note is *'the definition of an indigenous policy appropriate to the region, bearing in mind the area running along the frontier'*. One of the six regions chosen for immediate action in the frontier area included:

The area characterised by the presence of the Yanomami Indians, with a small population estimated at 7500, living in dozens of scattered long-houses along a long stretch — 900 km — of the border with Venezuela. In Venezuela too there are numerous indigenous groups belonging to the same race. For some time there have been signs of pressure, both from Brazilians and foreigners, with the aim of establishing — at the expense of present Brazilian and Venezuelan territory — a Yanomami state (*Projeto Calha Norte*, 'Estratégia' by Brig.-Gen. Rubem Bayma Denys, General Secretary of the National Security Council).

26. In reality the project creates security for large-scale capital investments on the Amazon frontier, integrating it economically with the rest of the country. In order to remove the obstacle created by the Indians, isolated portions of land are being demarcated so as to:

1. concentrate the Indians in small population groups, forcing them into conditions of dependence and



2. free the rest of Indian territory for economic exploitation.

7. Demarcation

Brazilian constitutions since 1934 have imposed a duty of guaranteeing the Indians possession of their lands. In the case of the Yanomami this duty has still not been fulfilled.

27. The first proposal for the demarcation of Yanomami land was produced in December 1968 by the anthropologists Alcida Ramos and

Kenneth Taylor. The second project was drafted in March 1969 by the prelate of Roraima, with the advice of the ethnologist René Fuerst.

28. FUNAI, in 1977 and 1978, by Orders 477/N, 515/N and 513/N established 21 discontinuous areas for 'indigenous occupation'. These would have resulted in the disorganisation of the Yanomami and the penetration of prospectors along 530 km-wide corridors.

29. The CCPY (Committee for the Creation of the Yanomami Park) submitted to FUNAI in 1979 a proposal for the creation of the Park, covering a total of 6,446,200 ha of continuous territory, taking account both of the socio-economic and cultural needs of the Yanomami and of the preservation



of the ecosystem.

30. In 1982 the minister of the interior, Mário Andreazza, interdicted an area of 7,000,000 ha. Two years later FUNAI administratively delimited the Yanomami territory and forwarded the process to the Inter-Ministerial Working Group, establishing the area as the Yanomami Indigenous Park (Order 1817 of 18 January 1985). In 1985 two bills were moved by Deputy Márcio Santilli and Senator Severo Gomes proposing to demarcate the Yanomami area.

31. On 13 September 1988 Interministerial Order 160 was published in the federal Official Gazette, announcing the limits of the land occupied by the Yanomami and decreeing its demarcation. This governmental act decreed the demarcation of 19 discontinuous indigenous areas within two forests and a national park. Only two months later, on 18 November 1988, Interministerial Order 250 revoked the previous Order, explaining that the forests and the park were not indigenous land and doing no more than giving the Indians priority in the use of the wealth existing in them. These acts reduced the area of Yanomami territory by 70%.

32. These acts violate Article 231 of the new Brazilian constitution, which guarantees the Indians the exclusive possession of the lands which they traditionally occupy and the exclusive benefit of the wealth existing on it, in the following terms:

Article 231. The Indians are recognised as having their own social organisation, customs, languages, beliefs and traditions, and rights of origin over the lands they traditionally occupy, and it shall be the responsibility of the central government to demarcate these lands and to protect and ensure respect for all their possessions.

1. Lands traditionally occupied by the Indians are those occupied by them in a permanent way, those used for their productive activities, those indispensable for the preservation of the environmental resources necessary for their well-being and those necessary for their physical and cultural reproduction, in accordance with their usages, customs and traditions.

2. The lands traditionally occupied by the Indians are to be for their permanent possession, and they have the exclusive benefit of the wealth of the ground, rivers and lakes existing in them.

... 4. The lands referred to in this Article are inalienable and non-transferable and rights over them cannot lapse.

The demarcation of Yanomami land in discontinuous areas means a death sentence for this people.

8. The Church

Among the many organisations fighting for the survival of the Indians is the church, which has been persecuted in Brazil for its defence of Indian rights.

33. The presence of the Catholic Church of Roraima alongside the Yanomami is effected by the Catrimani mission, which was founded in 1965. The mission had thus given 22 years of service to the Yanomami, especially in the area of health, from its establishment until 1987, when the Catrimani missionaries were expelled. The first medical surgery was set up in 1971. A second surgery and hospital were built in 1977. From 1976 a highly qualified nurse served the Yanomami, with the support of medical and dental teams. Knowledge of the Yanomami and their culture is another result of the dedicated work of missionaries for more than 20 years, giving witness to the Gospel by their lives and work.

34. The present team at the Catrimani mission consists of Sister Florença Águida Lindey, who speaks Yanomami and has a diploma in nursing studies from the Maria Auxiliadora Institute in Rio Grande do



Sul and qualifications in numerous specialisms, Fr Guilherme Damioli, holder of a master's degree in missiology from the Pontifical Urban University in Rome and a diploma in nursing from the Policlínico Gemelli in Rome, also speaks Yanomami, and Fr Giovanni Saffirio, who has a doctorate in cultural anthropology from the University of Pittsburgh and speaks Yanomami. They have always cooperated with the established authorities and have respected Brazilian law.

35. In the second half of 1988, as a result of the complaints of the missionaries and the legal advice given by CIMI (the Indigenist Missionary Council), the federal public prosecutor's office, in the person of Dr Italo Fioravante, applied for a court order rescinding the administrative act by which the mission had been removed.

36. The judge of the 2nd Federal Division of the Federal District granted an interim injunction authorising the missionaries to return to Catrimani and ordering the return of the property illegally seized. In its petition, the public prosecutor stressed that the action taken by FUNAI was 'arbitrary, incompatible with the state of law which the country is seeking to reach, and in addition has had results harmful to the health of the Yanomami, in view of the incompetence of FUNAI'.

On 15 August 1987 on the Paapi-U river, in the region of the river Couto Magãlhaes, four Yanomami were cruelly murdered by gold-prospectors, and one prospector died. This incident, sensationalised by the press in Roraima, served as a pretext for the expulsion of the Catrimani mission team on 24 August 1987.

In fact, the removal of the Catrimani mission was the result of an order by the official indigenous agency (FUNAI) in order to avoid an inconvenient presence, since the missionaries used to inform FUNAI of invasions of gold-prospectors, and questioned government negligence.

The missionaries were removed from Catrimani by police as though they were criminals. Of the mission team only Sister Florença remained in the area because of an outbreak of malaria among the Indians and as the result of a request by Archbishop Luciano Mendes de Almeida to the authorities in Brasília. But, from the following day, 25

August, Sister Florença had to endure the presence of a platoon of military police, and suffered every sort of physical and psychological pressure. On 28 August Sister Florença was taken to Boa Vista in a state of shock by eight police officers.

Without the medical attention given to the Yanomami by the mission four Indians died within two months: Sofia, a mother of four, Ixiti, with two children, Lisa, aged two and Koraxim, aged 77.

On 8 December 1987 the president of the bishops' conference, Archbishop Luciano Mendes de Almeida, visited Catrimani and was moved by the sight of so many abandoned children, and the sadness of the Indians, who wanted the missionaries to return.

As though the problems created for the missionaries by FUNAI were not enough, on 21 September 1987 Sister Florença was invited to return to Catrimani, on condition that she became an employee of FUNAI, which she of course refused to do.

7. Conclusion

To avoid the genocide of the Yanomami people we consider that Order 250/88 should be immediately revoked, since it reduces Yanomami territory by 70% and divides the other 30% into 19 discontinuous areas.

37. The Yanomami people are in grave risk of extermination. Economic, political and military interests, supported by the state, which should defend indigenous rights, are being given precedence over the rights of this people, whose aspiration is to live with dignity.

38. In the year in which we are commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — which Brazil signed — the Yanomami continue to be massacred, as though they were not human beings.

39. The church declares its opposition to this desperate situation. It calls on its faithful, and all people of goodwill, and appeals to the whole of society, to get this situation reversed, and insists on the following demands in defence of the Yanomami:

1. The rescinding of Inter-ministerial Order 250 of 18 November 1988 as unconstitutional and destructive of the physical and cultural integrity of the Yanomami;

2. The demarcation, as a matter of urgency, of the land traditionally occupied by the Yanomami, as the present constitution requires, with the boundaries established by FUNAI Order 1817 of 18 January 1985;

3. The immediate and permanent removal of all mineral prospectors, with an offer to them of a decent livelihood away from indigenous land;

4. Penal action against all those who have acted in such a way as to stimulate, promote and back this genocide or have neglected to take measures to prevent it.

40. The development and security of our country cannot be built on the corpses of the Yanomami. Brazil cannot connive in the disintegration and murder of indigenous populations.



41. The church has an evangelical mission to recognise the dignity of the Yanomami as children of God. The church associates its voice with the cry of the Yanomami and unites itself with other groups in society in defence of the rights of the indigenous peoples, who deserve our total respect and solidarity.
Brasília, 15 December 1988

Note. On 16 February 1989, by Presidential Decrees 97512-97530, President Sarney ratified the division of Yanomami territory into 19 discontinuous areas under Order 250, thus ignoring the appeals by the Yanomami themselves, the church and other organisations.

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