

BRAZIL

Tukanos Confront Mining Interests in Upper Rio Negro

For the past few months a tense situation has existed in the Upper Rio Negro region of the Amazon, with increasingly violent confrontations between Tukano Indians and gold prospectors on Indian land. Several deaths have resulted. In January, the Brazilian press reported that 60 Tukanos had been killed, but these reports are still unconfirmed.

Mining companies have requested permission from the government to mine within the Indian area. Exploration efforts by mining companies on the boundaries of the area have pushed gold prospectors into Indian territory. The situation is even more critical because the Brazilian government is considering the demarcation of the region, which would guarantee stronger, legal protection for the lands of the Tukano, Baniwa, Maku, and at least 13 other groups. Fifteen thousand indigenous people live in the area, which covers 35,000 square miles.

Brazil's National Department of Mineral Production (NDPM) has argued that the mineral-rich Traira Mountains be excluded from the area of demarcation.

According to a leader from the community of Pari-Cachoeira, the Traira is sacred land: "On top of the mountains, the monster cobra, Traira, makes the connections between all of the houses, the *malocas*. The elders warn of the consequences of destroying that hill from which they get the force of their wisdom, the sacred stones."

Documents obtained by SAIIC from Brazil suggest that mining companies are exerting greater pressure in Brasilia to obtain permission to mine on Indian lands. CONAGE, an association of Brazilian geologists, and Brazil's Ecumenical Center for Documentation and Information recently denounced the issuance of 120 permits for mining on Indian lands in the states of Para and Amapa, in the northeast Amazon. Indian leaders had previously denounced exploration permits issued to 19 companies in the Upper Rio Negro.

These permits can not be put into force without disregarding or changing Brazil's Indian Statute, which specifically states that all resources on Indian land are for the exclusive benefit of Indian people. Despite this fact, variances have been extended to several companies, and the boundary of the Waimiri-Atóari reserve was redrawn several years ago by presidential decree to allow tin mining to proceed.



Tukano Indian from Brazil

(Photo: Casimiro Beksta; reproduced from *Povos Indígenas no Brasil* 83, Centro Ecumênico de Documentação e Informação, São Paulo.)

New Tribes Mission Levels Accusations Against Brazilian Indian Leader

Biraci Brasil, Yawanawá and representative of Brazil's Union of Indigenous Nations (UNI), returned to his village following last November's Inter-American Indian Congress

meeting in Santa Fe (see photo and story in SAIIC Newsletter, Winter, 1986) to find he was victim of a smear campaign by fundamentalist missionaries. Members of the New Tribes Mission branded Biraci a communist and ordered him to leave his own village. He refused. According to Biraci, the state police intervened and "want to take away my right to be an Indian." He feels that the goal of the missionaries is to discredit him as a representative of UNI in the eyes of his own people.

The New Tribes Mission, whose headquarters is in Sanford, Florida, operates seven centers in the Acre region, with the stated purpose of converting Indians to Christianity. As widely reported in the media, in 1985 the New Tribes and its sister organization, the Mission Aviation Fellowship, were implicated in a plot to smuggle precious stones to the United States.

According to Biraci, UNI in its five years of existence has taken "a strong commitment to the Indian cause." UNI has also opposed fundamentalist groups working in Indian communities. According to *Porantim*, the monthly newspaper which covers Indian issues, The New Tribes was temporarily expelled from Colombia and Venezuela for trafficking in precious stones. They have strong political connections in Brasilia, as evidenced by the fact that a former minister of justice was also involved in the smuggling incident.

Changes in FUNAI—But for the Better?

Following a threat by FUNAI President Apoena Meirelles to resign if structural changes in the agency responsible for the welfare of Brazilian Indians were not made, Minister of Interior Ronaldo Costa Couto announced in February a major decentralization of the agency.

One concrete change will be the dispersal of FUNAI's bureaucracy in Brasilia into six regional superintendencies, maintaining only a skeleton administrative staff of 50 in the capital. Another change still not finalized will be the transformation of the agency into a special secretariat directly under the President of Brazil or under the National Security Council.

Neither change is likely to achieve significant gains in the level of Indian participation in decisions affecting their own survival. Decentralization of FUNAI may play into the hands of state and local politicians such as Governors Gilberto Mestrinho of Amazonas state, Angelo Angelim of Rondônia, and Getúlio Cruz of Roraima, who have said they will not recognize new demarcations of Indian lands in their states and have attacked the "huge" areas being allotted to Indian reserves.

