

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-Atorari 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