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Brazil: Retired Military Officers Oppose Creation Of Yanomami Reserve

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On May 12 in Brasilia, Antonio de Souza Garcia, president of the Military Reservist and Armed Forces Retiree Associations Federation, submitted a document to the national legislature calling for suspension of a 1991 presidential decree setting aside a 94,000 sq.km. reserve in northern Brazil for the Yanomami tribe. According to the Federation, research carried out by the Amazon Military Command, the Air Force Ministry and the former national secret police (Servico Nacional de Informacao-SNI) indicated that data used by the government to demarcate the territory was incomplete and riddled with errors. De Souza told reporters that the military's efforts to ensure security along the Brazilian-Venezuelan border inside the proposed reserve boundaries would be compromised. In addition, the Federation disagrees with National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) census figures. According to FUNAI, the Yanomami number 10,000. The Federation says the real population count is under 4,000. Consequently, the size of the proposed Yanomami reserve is excessive. The Federation dismissed preservation of the Amazon Basin to reduce the greenhouse effect as a justification for creating the reserve. Instead, the reserve was established to serve the interests of developed nations who wish to dominate the Amazon region. The Federation asserted, moreover, the government failed to take into account "vast mineral resources" within the reserve area. De Souza told reporters that the Yanomami have practically no "intellectual development... [They] live by the laws of nature, rather than reason." According to de Souza, "Our task should be to provide the Indians with culture, to civilize and Christianize them. It is inhumane to have these Indians living in a state of privation." Following a decade of domestic and international pressure to save the Yanomami culture from extinction, in November 1991, Collor authorized the demarcation of the Yanomami reservation. As a result of contact with gold miners alone, at least 1,500 Yanomami have died. The causes of death included violence, and contagious disease (malaria, measles, venereal diseases and influenza). In addition, miners' activities clearing land and polluting streams with mercury have had a devastating impact on the Amazon ecosystem. (Sources: Agence France-Presse, 05/10/92; Spanish news service EFE, 05/12/92)

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