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Miners and Disease Threaten the Yanomami

by Guest
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[The following article by Mike Ceaser is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the May 13, 2004, edition of Latinamerica Press.]

A decade after a massacre committed by Brazilian miners drew world attention to Venezuela's Yanomami indigenous people (see Notisur, 1993-10-01 and 1993-08-27), the group remains at "high-risk" of suffering another massacre, advocates for the group say.

Most Yanomami far from protection of authorities

The Yanomami, divided between Brazil and Venezuela, where some 14,000 live in southern Amazonas state, generally live by hunting, gathering, and fishing and by making handicrafts. Many of the communities have had little contact with civilization and residents of isolated communities speak only their own language.

In August 1993, however, the Yanomami clashed tragically with the outside world, when Brazilian miners gunned down 16 Yanomami in a remote border village. The community was so isolated that it took about a month for the news to reach Venezuelan authorities, and it then took longer to determine whether the village was in Brazil or Venezuela.

Human rights attorneys said that miners seeking bauxite and diamonds continue to invade Yanomami territory, mostly from Brazil. New clashes have occurred in recent months, although no one had been killed, they say.

Bracing for disaster

"There's is a high risk of another massacre occurring," said Marino Alvarado, an attorney at the Caracas human rights organization Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos (PROVEA). The miners often employ mercury, which drains into rivers, making fish poisonous, he added. "In some regions they can no longer fish. Some Yanomami have had to relocate because their territory has been occupied," Alvarado said. The Yanomami inhabit an expansive territory with few roads or border posts and little modern communication.

Effectively controlling migration and smuggling across such borders has proved impossible throughout Latin America. Maria Daniela Maldonado, an attorney with the Vicariate of Puerto Ayacucho, which is also representing the Yanomami, said that members of the National Guard posted on Venezuela's frontier with Brazil often accept bribes to let miners enter the country. "The problem of mining is serious, very serious," she said. "The indigenous people are under the threat [of miners]."
Some Yanomami communities have recently reported seeing more trash floating down rivers a telltale sign of new mining camps upstream. In a recent clash between indigenous groups and miners, the deaths were on the side of the miners.

In late April, Brazilian police recovered the bodies of 26 diamond miners suspected of having been killed a couple weeks earlier by members of the Cinta Larga indigenous group on their reserve in Brazil's richest diamond region.

Mercio Pereira Gomes, head of the government agency Fundacao Nacional do Indio (FUNAI), which oversees indigenous reserves, said the killings should be seen in the context of miners invading indigenous lands. "They were defending their territory," he said. The arrival of outsiders has long been blamed for causing a host of severe impacts on Yanomami communities.

In 1984, demanding that Brazil establish a protected area for the Yanomami, an attorney told the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) that "massive penetration of outsiders" into Yanomami territories had broken up the Indians' social organization, brought prostitution, and caused epidemics among the Indians. After the 1993 incident, Brazilian authorities arrested four miners called garimpeiros and charged them with the murders. Three of the men later escaped, but one was convicted of homicide in a case still being heard in Brazil's Supreme Court. Because Venezuela did not launch its own investigation, human rights attorneys representing the Yanomami took the case to the Inter-American Court, PROVEA's Alvarado said.

In December 1999, the Venezuelan government and the Yanomami's representatives reached a preliminary agreement, under which the government promised to take a series of steps including implementing a health plan and demarcating and protecting the Yanomami territory. But Yanomami advocates say the government has fulfilled almost none of its commitments.

In 2002, Venezuela did budget 1.5 billion bolivares (then about US$1.5 million) for Yanomami health programs, but none of it was actually spent. While the 20% of Yanomami who live along waterways have access to health clinics, those in the interior still receive absolutely no health assistance, Alvarado said. "What's certain is that the Yanomami's health has not improved, despite the existence of the agreement, despite the existence of the budget," Alvarado said. In fact, the health situation has deteriorated, said Maldonado.

During Venezuela's past two years of political and economic turmoil, malaria-control efforts have ceased, and the disease has become more common among the Yanomami, she added. But Aime Tillett, an anthropologist with the Ministry of Health's office for indigenous health issues, said the Venezuelan government has every intention of implementing health programs for the Yanomami, but that bureaucratic and budgetary difficulties had blocked use of the funds.

Tillett said a December 2002-February 2003 petroleum-industry strike, which failed in its goal of forcing out President Hugo Chavez but devastated the nation's economy (see NotiSur, 2003-01-31), delayed the distribution of the funds budgeted for the Yanomami. The Health Ministry received the money too late to be able to use it and by law must now either contract with an existing...
nongovernmental organization or create a new one with Yanomami participation to spend it, Tillett said.

Tillett hopes to implement a two-pronged strategy: improving the health clinics, which already serve the riverside communities that constitute an estimated 20% of the Yanomami, and organizing medical teams to visit interior communities. He said diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, and leishmaniosis are endemic in Yanomami communities. Curing many parasitical diseases means repeated medication over many days, requiring medics to remain for days in interior communities. "(The lack of action) is not because of a lack of willingness or resources from the government," Tillett said, "because the resources do exist."

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