

## Brazil – Jewel of the Amazon

### *Frontline World: Stories from a Small Planet*

TEXT:

Brazil: Jewel of the Amazon

Reported by Maria van Zeller

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

This road through the Amazon is not on any of Brazil's official maps. It's one of hundreds of paths that have been cut through the country's rainforest in recent years for timber and ranch land.

[to driver, via translation] What are we seeing here on the right?

DRIVER:

[via translation] The forest is being turned into grazing land. It's sad to see this.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

But this is not what has brought Brazil's federal police deep into the jungle. These trees were cleared by wildcat miners who've come in search of the Amazon's latest treasure: diamonds. In the last few years, more than a billion dollars in diamonds has been extracted from this forest, and if the big mining companies are allowed in, many believe this could become the richest diamond mine in the world. The problem is that the diamonds are on the reservation of the Cinta Larga Indian tribe, and mining is illegal on all of Brazil's Indian lands.

Since diamonds were first discovered here in the late 1990s, a black market has thrived. But now, this special unit of Brazil's federal police has been sent in to shut it down. They've moved into this camp just outside the Cinta Larga reservation. We've been granted rare access to film with them. Police Chief Mauro Sposito is the head of special operations in the Amazon. He tries to explain how the Cinta Larga's diamond trade works.

MAURO SPOSITO:

[via translation] A diamond mined here was sold for \$8,000. Later it was resold to a middleman for \$25,000, who then passed it on to a buyer in Sao Paulo, who was selling the diamond for \$250,000 when we seized it.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

In the towns that surround the Cinta Larga Indian reservation, the federal police told us, diamonds have become a boom business. Locals act as middlemen, buying diamonds from the Indians and the miners, then selling to big buyers who fly into the Amazon from

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around the country and around the world, chasing the promise of very cheap, very pure diamonds. [3:27]

[on phone, via translation] So, we're set?

[narrating] A buyer agreed to take me on a tour of the diamond black market here as long as I didn't identify him.

BUYER:

[via translation] There are usually some buyers here. There is one in a red shirt and one in a green shirt.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

[via translation] They are buyers?

BUYER:

Yes.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

[narrating] The diamond trade is still thriving here, this buyer later told me at his house, even as the government threatens to step in.

[to camera] This diamond came out of the reserve in the last week. It's more than five carats, and it's being sold for around \$6,000. On the open market, this diamond will later be resold for five or ten times more.

[to buyer, via translation] Is it easy to sell this diamond?

BUYER:

[via translation] Easy. Diamonds are easy to sell. Easier to sell than cocaine.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

Around the Cinta Larga reservation, black market diamonds have led to rising violence. Here in the jungle, the federal police were first called in a few years ago to investigate the murder of two Indian leaders by miners. This time, it's the Indians who are accused of murder, a massacre of miners that shocked Brazil just a few months before we arrived. Chief Sposito was put in charge of the investigation. He's become the government's point man with the Indians.

It was only in the 1960s that the Cinta Larga were first contacted by the Brazilian government. White men are still not allowed on the reserve without an invitation, but we've negotiated our way in with the federal police. We're surprised to find the Cinta Larga in full warrior dress. We've been told that the Indians who participated in the

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massacre dressed like this at the time, using bows and arrows, spears and guns to kill the miners who they said were taking diamonds off their reservation without permission. Rumors have been spreading that the Brazilian government is planning to seize the Cinta Larga's mine, so police chief Sposito addresses this right away. [6:04]

MAURO SPOSITO:

[via translation] First of all, I would like to explain something, for you to wipe it from your minds once and for all. Nobody is going to take you off the lands that you occupy. These lands belong to the Cinta Larga.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

Chief Sposito walks a fine line with the Indians. They have the right to live off the land, he says, but the diamonds that lie underground are another matter.

MAURO SPOSITO:

[via translation] This might be the biggest diamond mine in the world. The government's idea is to regulate this mine.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

In broken Portuguese, Chief Joao Bravo argues that the diamonds belong to the Cinta Larga.

CHIEF JAO BRAVO:

[via translation] I'm in charge here. I have my rights here. You have your rights somewhere else. The government has its rights in the big city, in the capital. If we aren't able to mine, it will be bad for us.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

Without money from diamonds, the chief fears, his tribe won't be able to sustain itself.

CHIEF JAO BRAVO:

[via translation] Who's going to bring things to the community? Are you going to bring food to us? You never did. Nobody comes here to bring medicine. Nobody. For a long time, I strangled people. For a long time I killed white men. But not today, not today. Today we are all friendly. So you have to respect us.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

After listening to the tribe's grievances, the standoff finally ends with an agreement to shut down the mine temporarily while the government decides who controls the diamonds. The deal is sealed with ceremonial music; the sharing of *chicha*, a traditional drink of fermented cassava root; and the slaughtering of a cow.

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A few days later, we would become the first outside film crew allowed into the diamond mine at the center of the controversy. Chief Joao Bravo agreed to meet us here; with him, Iscarlon(sp) Cinta Larga. Both have been indicted for the massacre. They tell us how the tribe first got involved with diamonds.

ISCARLON:

[8:55] For a long time we were told there were diamonds here. But we Indians didn't believe it. But when we stopped selling wood, we had no other option. We didn't know.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

[via translation] You didn't know what diamonds were?

ISCARLON:

No, no, no, no.

CHIEF JAO BRAVO:

[via translation] I didn't even know what a diamond was. It was another chief, Pio, who showed me first. I couldn't believe how much they were worth. Nobody could. They were so small, but worth so much.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

[narrating] The Indians were at first suspicious of the diamond miners who began coming onto the reservation. But then they worked out a deal with them.

ISCARLON:

[via translation] The word spread and some 5,000 miners came in. I remember that miners had to pay \$5,000 to get in.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

Some Cinta Larga learned to mine diamonds themselves, but mostly it was outsiders who came, paying the Indians for the rights to mine here. For years the arrangement worked, and the government did little about it. But then some of the miners snuck upriver. They cleared a new mine and began taking diamonds without paying anything to the Cinta Larga. When the Indians found out about it, they threatened violence. The miners kept coming. Then, in April 2004, as hundreds of miners worked in what they thought was a secret location, the Indians ambushed them. The police later found the bodies, most of the mutilated beyond recognition.

MAURO SPOSITO:

[via translation] They were all lined up side by side. They died in a row, one after the other. It was a massacre. A vision from hell. Especially since we arrived at the scene a week after it happened. So it was really a disturbing scene.

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MARIA VAN ZELLER:

Finding a survivor of the massacre willing to speak on camera was difficult. Many miners hope to mine diamonds on the reservation again, and they fear retribution from the Cinta Larga if they speak about what they saw. Finally I found a miner who agreed to tell me his story if I did not reveal his identity. The day of the massacre began like any other, he said, until he heard gunfire.

MINER:

[via translation] POW! The 12-gauge went off. I said, “Holy Mary!” [11:48] Now that the Indians are here, it’s going to rain bullets. I was jumping, trying to climb out of the hole. I couldn’t, I kept on sliding back to the bottom. And the shots kept on coming.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

This miner told me that as many as 100 men may have died that day, many more than the official body count of 29.

MINER:

[via translation] From where I was hiding, I could hear the screams. Miners begging, for the love of God, not to be killed. Miners crying and screaming, but nothing worked. They were all killed.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

While 22 Cinta Larga have now been indicted in the massacre, it is unlikely any of them will ever be convicted. Under Brazil’s Constitution, Indians from isolated communities can be considered ignorant of the country’s laws, even those against murder. Many miners feel the government is willing to let the Indians go free to quiet tensions around the diamond mine.

Carlos Gonzalez was headed to the Cinta Larga reservation on the day of the massacre but his car broke down. Friends of his killed by the Indians are buried just a few miles away.

[to Gonzalez, via translation] Do you think the Indians knew what they were doing was wrong?

CARLOS GONZALEZ:

[via translation] If it was an Indian living naked in the jungle with no contact with the white man, then OK. But in this case, they lost their innocence years ago. Once they dress like white men, use the things white men use, imported cars, cell phones, and satellite phones, they are no longer children. For sure, they knew what they were doing.

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MARIA VAN ZELLER:

[narrating] In town, miners wait anxiously for the government to reopen the mine and to punish the Indians. In the immediate aftermath of the massacre, the miners took matters into their own hands. They captured this Cinta Larga man who they claimed participated in the killings. The man was beaten and tied to a tree in the town square, where a bystander shot this video. Local police prevented a lynching. But not long after, a 14-year-old Cinta Larga boy was shot dead by miners in the street. Now, few Indians dare mix with the white population in town.

Until fairly recently, the Cinta Larga lived essentially as they had since the Stone Age. Then, in the 1960s, as Brazil began to expand into the Amazon, the government set them up on reservations. The tribe numbered around 5,000 at the time. But today only 1,300 Cinta Larga remain. In just a few years, diamonds have become their lifeblood.

This is Chief Pio. [15:03] He was reluctant to be interviewed. But he agreed to speak to me on the condition that I did not ask him about the massacre, for which he too has been indicted.

CHIEF PIO:

[via translation] So many things changed after we started living with the white man's culture. Money changed the life of the Cinta Larga people. We want both cultures, we want to have cars. We want to have those things that the white man brought here. We weren't the ones who went looking for those things. It was the white man's culture that came looking for us.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

Of Brazil's roughly 400 remaining Indian tribes, the Cinta Larga may now be the most prosperous. They say they'll resist any government plan to turn their diamond mine over to outsiders.

CHIEF PIO:

[via translation] Today our people don't want to hand it over to a mining company. We would prefer that the government say, "You're the ones who are going to mine." That's what we want.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

[via translation] If this doesn't happen, do you think they will fight?

CHIEF PIO:

[via translation] Yes, I believe so. There are some who say, "We're not going to hand it over, we're going to fight for the government to hand it to us."

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MARIA VAN ZELLER:

[narrating] Izanoel Sodre is a government anthropologist who was called in to work with the Cinta Larga after the massacre. He says that the Indians who killed the miners were not murderers, they were doing what they've always done in warrior cultures.

IZANOEL SODRE:

[via translation] I asked a Cinta Larga about the massacre, and this is what he said: "If you pass close to a beehive, the bees won't do anything. But if you try to take something from inside it, they will attack you." The same thing happened to the Indians. They were attacked and they defended themselves.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

[via translation] But how were they attacked?

IZANOEL SODRE:

[via translation] In the loss of their territory, in the invasion of their territory.

MARIA VAN ZELLER:

[17:30] Back at their camp in the jungle, the federal police continue to keep miners from sneaking onto the reservation, and keep Indians from selling their diamonds on the black market. Chief Pio has come here to discuss the latest Brazilian government plan. In exchange for continuing to keep the mine closed, Chief Sposito explains, the government has granted the Cinta Larga a 15-day amnesty to sell what's left of their illegally mined diamonds to Caixa, Brazil's federal bank.

Most of the Cinta Larga are skeptical. But one man decides to sell a 28-carat diamond. On the black market it would bring him a few thousand dollars cash, but he can make a lot more by selling it through the government. A few months later, the diamond turned up here. It was valued at \$112,000 at this auction in Rio de Janeiro for major diamond buyers in Brazil and around the world.

The government called the diamond buyback program a success. But the big question has not been solved: who should control what may be the biggest diamond mine in the world? The international mining companies are pushing hard for a change in the Brazilian Constitution that would legalize mining, not just on the Cinta Larga reservation but on all of Brazil's indigenous lands. It's a move that could potentially open up the whole of the Amazon to big industry.

Back on the reservation, the Cinta Larga wait for the government's decision about the future of the mine. Chief Pio and the others indicted may yet face trial for the massacre. But the Indians and the miners may soon find themselves on the same side in a fight that could potentially determine the future of the Amazon.

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MAURO SPOSITO:

[via translation] This issue of the Indians and the miners is a war of the miserable. They are just people who are trying to survive, earning a little money to survive, while the cartels are taking advantage of that war. So miners die, Indians die, while the ones benefiting are those negotiating, speculating on the diamond market.