New Life for the Yanomami - Association Plays Key Role in Major Shift in Brazilian Policy

by Terry Turner, Chair, Special AAA Commission to Investigate the Situation of the Brazilian Yanomami

In a historically unprecedented initiative, the President and Executive Board of the Association in February of this year established a Special Commission to investigate the situation of the Brazilian Yanomami. The Yanomami of Brazil were and are rapidly perishing as the result of a massive invasion of their territory by miners, supported by federal and local government policies that violated constitutional guarantees of indigenous rights and defied the orders of Brazilian federal courts. The Commission conducted an investigation and submitted a report, which was adopted by the Executive Board at its May meeting in Washington. The report’s recommendations, including the publication of the Commission’s findings in the media and their communication to US government representatives and concerned international and non-governmental bodies, were implemented. These measures were timed to coincide with the visit of President Collor to Washington in mid-June. Important coverage in press and radio media, including Op Ed columns in the New York Times and International Herald Tribune and radio interviews on NPR and the Latin American Service of the Voice of America, was achieved. Directly inspired by briefing papers prepared by a member of the Commission and drawing upon its report, a number of governmental figures, including eight Senators and President Bush, brought pressure on Collor on the Yanomami issue.

The Brazilian Government has responded to these pressures by reversing its policy toward the Yanomami in the three essential respects called for by the Association’s report: official legal demarcation of the full territory of the Yanomami as a continuous area, in place of the minuscule discontinuous areas to which recent government decrees had reduced them; expulsion of all miners from Yanomami territory, with the destruction of the illegal airstrips they have constructed there; and an adequately funded campaign of medical assistance to deal with the devastating malaria epidemic the miners and their operations have caused.

Brazilian observers on both sides of the issue agree that the pressure brought on Collor and the Brazilian Government during his US visit was the decisive factor in bringing about the promised changes. This pressure was almost entirely derived, directly or indirectly, from the Association’s investigative Commission, its Report and its activities in implementation of the recommendations of the report as adopted by the Board. Taken together, the new measures taken by Collor and his administration represent a major change which could well make the difference between extinction and survival for the Yanomami of Brazil. The Association can take collective satisfaction from the key role it has played in bringing about this result.

The Commission’s Report gives a review of the recent history of the Brazilian Yanomami and their interaction with Brazilian society, sets out a public statement by the Association about their present situation and the responsibility of Brazilian Federal and State Governments for it, and concludes with a series of recommended actions to be initiated by the Association. The full text of the Report is available from AAA national headquarters. A brief resume of the most pertinent facts can be given here.

The Yanomami are the largest Amazonian nation still living in relative isolation from Western society (or were until the isolation was abruptly ended, on the Brazilian side, by invasion of gold and cassiterite miners in 1987–91). Distributed in roughly equal parts on both sides of the border between Brazil and Venezuela, they had until 1988 a population of about 20,000. Now it is some 2,000 less, as a result of the catastrophic effects of the miners’ invasion. With their land invaded by as many as 40,000 gold miners, a raging malaria epidemic caused by the large areas of standing water resulting from placer of gold mining...
mining operations, 70% of their land unconstitutionally expropriated and the rest divided into 19 discontinuous enclaves by Governmental decrees supportive of the miners' interests, an absence of police protection against abuses by the miners, connivance of the police and armed forces in the miners' illegal presence, and little effective medical assistance, the Brazilian Yanomami by 1989 were dying at the rate of over 10% per year, while fertility had dropped to near zero. Already many villages were left with no children or old people. The survivors, thus cut off from both living future and cultural past, awaited their fate with what one anthropological observer described as "a profound terror of extinction".

Reports of the rapidly worsening plight of the Yanomami of Brazil reached AAA National Headquarters, and in February of this year the President and Executive Board decided to take the historically unprecedented step of appointing a Special Commission to investigate the situation and recommend actions to be taken by the Association to help the Yanomami. The mandate of the Commission was specifically limited to the Yanomami of Brazil, since the conditions of the Venezuelan Yanomami were not only far less desperate but also different in essential political, legal and economic particulars.

Terry Turner was appointed Chair of the Commission, with authority to appoint five other members and additional consultants as appropriate. Davi Kopenawa, the main spokesman for the Brazilian Yanomami, agreed to serve as a special consultant to the Commission, and a long statement by him, in the form of an interview with Turner, forms an integral part of the Commission's Report. Excerpts from this interview are published in this Newsletter, and the full text will appear in the next issue of Cultural Survival Quarterly.

The makeup of the Commission is international, with Bruce Albert (France), Alcida Ramos (Brazil), and Stephan Schwartzman, Anthony Seeger, and Jason Clay (USA) as members, and Claudia Andujar, the Director of the Commission for the Creation of a Yanomami Park, and Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, both of Brazil, as consultants. Turner conducted a field investigation for the Commission in March of this year, travelling to Brasilia, Manaus and Boa Vista, the capital of the State of Roraima, where most of the Brazilian Yanomami are located, to interview key figures in the Yanomami situation.

The Report calls upon the Association to bring the plight of the Yanomami to the attention of international bodies such as the International Commission on Human Rights of the UN and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the OAS; to relevant agencies of the US Government, including heads of key Congressional Committees; to appropriate officials of the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank; to major newspapers and other media; to other scientific associations with human rights concerns, such as the AAAS; and to NGOs actively or potentially involved in support of the Yanomami. It specifically calls for the preparation of a Portuguese translation of the Report to be circulated to its sister anthropological association in Brazil, the Associacao Brasileira de Antropologia, and other concerned parties and groups in Brazil, including the Yanomami themselves (as represented by Davi Kopenawa, their principal leader). All of these steps have been implemented. It also draws the attention of all anthropologists teaching courses using Yanomami materials to the Report and its accompanying statement by Davi Kopenawa for possible inclusion in their courses.

The specific measures taken by President Collor in response to the criticisms of his Administration's record on the Yanomami with which he was confronted on his trip to the US in June include the firing of the head of FUNAI, the Brazilian Bureau of Indian Affairs, ostensibly for failure to demarcate the Yanomami reserve, and the appointment of a new head specifically charged with this task; the dismissal of a commission he had appointed only a few weeks previously to "study" the "question" of the
boundaries of a Yanomami reserve (i.e., to find ways to shrink them) in favor of going ahead with the
demarcation of the full area of 94,191 sq. km. originally recognized by the previous Brazilian
Administration in 1985; appropriation of sufficient funds to enable the Federal Police to carry out an
effective program of expulsion of miners and destruction of illegal airstrips on Yanomami land; and
adequate funding of the Ministry of Health's program of medical assistance to the Yanomami. It should
be emphasized that as of this writing, with the exception of the change of leadership at FUNAI and the
appropriation of medical funds, these promises have not yet been fulfilled; continued pressure will be
necessary until they are. Indications are, however, that this time the Brazilian Government is
determined to correct the errors of its past policies, both of omission and commission, with respect to
the Yanomami. Brazil can ill afford the level of international criticism and embarrassment its handling of
the Yanomami has brought it, in a year when it is seeking major funds for debt relief, ecological
conservation in the Amazon, and hosting a major UN conference on the environment.

The appointment of the Commission marked the first time the Association had taken the initiative in
intervening in a situation in which the existence of a cultural minority was threatened (there have been
a number of such interventions in the past, but always in response to resolutions brought by individual
members at annual meetings). Given its historic importance as a precedent, the Commission sought, in a
preamble to its report, to define the general grounds on which its charge could be construed to fall
within the Association's legitimate concerns. The key sentences read,

The ability of a group to define and live according to its own shared cultural meanings and values is a
fundamental human right. When a people's legal rights or social or cultural self-determination are
denied, or its mode of life or physical existence are threatened, because of its cultural differences from
other groups, this Association [as an organization of researchers, teachers and professionals concerned
with culture and cultural differences] has a legitimate concern with such abuses, and both a right and an
obligation to speak out against them, regardless of where in the world they occur.

The report, in short, argues for a specific human right to cultural self-determination as the basis of the
legitimacy of its creation by, and activities on behalf of, the Association. By adopting the report, the
Executive Board has implicitly endorsed this position. The Yanomami Commission and its Report thus
constitute a contribution to the broader discussion of the Association's position on human rights, and
the proper scope of its commitments and activities in this field.