The Yanomami Report - Background

By Terence S. Turner

In late 1990, the situation of the Yanomami on the Brazilian side of the Venezuelan frontier was desperate. In spite of a long campaign by a dedicated Brazilian NGO, the Commissão pela Criação dum Parque Yanomami (Committee for the Creation of a Yanomami Park), and pressure by international human rights and indigenous support organizations, the Brazilian government seemed to have decided against creating a single Yanomami reservation. Instead, it was moving towards breaking up Yanomami territory into 19 small enclaves, leaving the larger part of Yanomami country as free and open "corridors" which could be used by gold miners who were already invading the Yanomami area, bringing malaria, massive ecological damage, and general social disruption. Amidst an international outcry by activists and anthropologists, AAA President Annette Weiner decided to appoint an ad hoc committee to investigate and report to the Executive Board with recommendations on what the Association could and should do. This was the Special Commission to Investigate the Situation of the Brazilian Yanomami. Terence Turner was appointed as head, with power to appoint other members. The resulting Commission was an international group that included the leading Brazilian Yanomami activist, Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, anthropologists who had worked with the Brazilian Yanomami groups (Alcida Ramos, of Brazil and Bruce Albert, from France) and experts on Brazilian indigenous issues such as Stephan Schwartzman of the Environmental Defense Fund in Washington. Turner traveled to Roraima to speak with Yanomami, government officials, the Catholic bishop of Roraima and members of the Consolata Medical Mission, and activists of the CCPY. He interviewed Davi Yanomami and translated the text of the interview with the help of Bruce Albert for inclusion in the Commission’s report and for publication in the Cultural Survival Quarterly. With advice from Albert, Davi, Ramos and Schwartzman, Turner wrote the report for the Commission. It recommended, among other things, that the President of the Association write to the President of Brazil, and other Brazilian officials and concerned groups, protesting the proposed break up of Yanomami territory and calling for the prompt formation of a continuous Yanomami reserve, as recommended by the government’s own commission and by the CCPY. A Portuguese translation of the Report was prepared and circulated to Brazilian organizations and journalists. Copies of the report were also circulated to US government officials in the State Department, to members of the Senate and House of Representatives with a record of Human Rights and Latin American concerns, and major academic, human rights, and indigenous support organizations in the US and abroad. Several of the latter wrote letters of protest to the Brazilian government.

Meanwhile, members of the Commission were taking action outside the purview of the AAA itself. Schwartzman prepared a letter protesting the Brazilian government’s policy toward the Yanomami which he succeeded in having eight US Senators sign and send to President Bush. Turner wrote an OpEd column that was published in the New York Times. Just at this point, in June 1991, Brazilian President Fernando Collor made a state visit to Washington. He got a chilly reception from President Bush and the US media, but Bush did raise the Yanomami question with him, mentioning the Senators’ letter. The New York Times OpEd appeared on the second day of his visit amid a virtual absence of other media coverage. Meanwhile, Brazilian media covered the AAA Report. Collor returned from Washington, fired
the head of FUNAI, the Brazilian Indian Agency, and appointed a new director with orders to set up the Yanomami reserve. This was done soon thereafter.

Having fulfilled its mission, the Yanomami Commission was disbanded by incoming AAA President Jane Buikstra in late 1991.