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Yanomami

Profile

Yanomami are one of the largest groups - numbering some 9,000 - of hunter gatherers living in the Amazonian rain-forest of Roraima and Amazonas states, which straddles the Brazil-Venezuela border. They are also known as Ianomâmi, Yanomamõ, Yanomama, Yanoama and Xirianá. Yanomami means 'forest land' and is one of the main language groups spoken, including Kami, Yamaki and Urihipë (data: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística).

Historical context

The first contact with the Yanomami occurred in 1910 with the opening of border commissions, and later, in the 1940s, through Roman Catholic and Protestant missionary groups. After the illegal invasion of Yanomami lands by *garimpeiros* (small-scale independent miners) an estimated 20 per cent were exterminated through disease. A major campaign by national and international support groups in 1991 resulted in the signing of a presidential decree on 25 May 1992 creating an 'indigenous park' which covered all Yanomami lands in Brazil.

Nevertheless, in August 1993 international attention was again focused on the region following the slaughter of 16 Yanomami of the village of Haximú by *garimpeiros* in the territorial dispute prompted by the miners' attempts to exploit the rich mineral deposits of Yanomami land. Yanomami spokesperson Davi Kopenawa requested the military evacuation of gold prospectors and the blowing up of their illegally constructed runways. The National Indian Foundation stressed the need for permanent vigilance over the reserve and confirmed that, despite pressure from Roraima state politicians, the extent of the Yanomami reserve would not be diminished.

Current issues

The increasing influence of military bases at Maturacá, Surucucus and Auaris has generated a host of social problems and prostitution. Migration to Roraima continues from other regions in Brazil, bringing criminal influences. Further, a forest fire that took place in 1998 has made it more difficult for the Yanomami to protect their land boundaries.

In a September 2007 interview with the international NGO Survival International, Davi Yanomami, an indigenous leader of the Yanomami organization Hutukara, spoke out against the government's current proposals to pass a new mining law, which the Yanomami argue will destroy and rob them of their legally demarcated lands, as well as damage their way of life and the health and livelihood of their communities. The Yanomami see the law as threatening to offer a green light to miners to invade their territories and encourage the further amassing of private wealth for multinational companies, while they will remain in poverty.

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