

URIHI - REPORT N° 1

Surucucus: Closed to Mining

On 21 August, the Commission of Mines and Energy, of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, held an important meeting to discuss the question of mineral policy, particularly in relation to the dispute between mining companies and prospectors and the opening of the Serra de Surucucus to mining. The principal points of view expressed were those of Elmer Salomão, President of the Taboca Mining Company, and José Altino Machado, self-declared representative of prospecting of mineral policy and legislation, which would include the professionalization and incorporation of prospecting activities. Salomão argued for a systematic redefinition of mineral policy and legislation, which would include the professionalization and incorporation of prospecting activities. Machado, on the other hand, defended the garimpeiros (prospectors) and prospecting with much rhetoric against the companies and what he declared were arbitrary and negative actions of the government. Claiming that the Indians themselves are in favor of prospecting, and that the minerals of Surucucus are being controlled by foreign interests, Machado reiterated his long-held position that the Serra be opened to mining by Indians and garimpeiros.

Machado's position stood in direct contrast to a legal project (n° 1.179) then under consideration by Congress. Proposed by Deputy Mozarildo Cavalcanti (Roraima), this Project advocated the opening of Surucucus to cassiterite mining, through an agreement between FUNAI, the government of Roraima, and state mining and development companies.

Following their meeting, the Commission of Mines and Energy decided to visit the Surucucus region, together with the Indian Commission of Congress, in order to evaluate whether the area should be opened to companies or to prospectors. According to news reports, upon their visit, the federal deputies were told by the Yanomami that the area should not be opened to either.

The principal justification of Cavalcanti's project was that the current severe economic crisis in Roraima could be solved if Surucucus were opened to cassiterite mining. Arguments against this justification were put forward by Deputy Márcio Santilli, one of the principal defenders of the creation of the Yanomami park, and other members of the Indian Commission. In his report, Santilli presented systematic evidence of the lethal effects (including deaths and epidemic diseases) that mining and prospecting activities have had on Yanomami communities over the past ten years. In addition, Santilli cited a 1980 report of the Vale do Rio Doce (CVRD) which clearly states that there are sufficient cassiterite reserves in other parts of Brazil, and that the costs of mining in an area as remote as Surucucus are so prohibitive as to warrant not exploiting the region. The CVRD, in fact, recommended that Surucucus be declared a National Mineral Reserve, which would protect the area's mineral resources and, at the same time, allow FUNAI time to improve its assistance programs among the 4,000 Yanomami of the area, many of whom have had little or no contact. Although the National Department of Mineral Research (DNPM) rejected the CVRD'S recommendation, Deputy Santilli presented it as a legal project before the Congress last year.

In his conclusion, Santilli argued that the current development crisis of Roraima would not be solved by the exploitation of Surucucus and that if Cavalcanti's project were passed, it

would result in the annihilation of the Yanomami nation. Other deputies of the Indian Commission supported Santilli's arguments, affirming the need to respect the human rights of the Yanomami and other Indian nations above development interests and quick solutions to Roraima's economic problems. On the basis of these arguments, Cavalcanti's project was firmly vetoed (12-2 vote) by the Indian Commission. The project will soon be presented before a General Assembly of the Chamber of Deputies. When it is, the CCPY will ask the Yanomami support network to send letter of concern to Brazilian deputies.

On 17 October, members of the Mines and Energy Commission returned to Roraima and visited the Serra de Surucucus.

In Boa Vista, they were met by José Altino Machado who invited them to a meeting with garimpeiros to discuss the reopening of the Serra. With one exception (João Batista Fagundes), the deputies refused Machado's invitation. The deputies felt that the Serra de Surucucus was, in an official way, a lost battle for the companies and the garimpeiros and that henceforth their political concerns would focus on the Constitutional Assembly in 1986 and the transformation of Roraima into a state.

Neither Machado nor Cavalcanti, however, intend to desist in their campaign. At the meeting with garimpeiros, Machado declared the following: "Really, I am only one person, and it could be that I will be sent to prison again. (1) But this Territory will have a summer in 1986 like it has never had when Mr. Jaci (2) freed me from the penitentiary, I promised him that we would have better luck next summer: possibly I will be in prison again, but the garimpeiros of the Territory will be up there" (at the Serra de Surucucus).

Cavalcanti, for his part, declared on Boa Vista television, that the Macuxi Indians of Roraima had agreed to mine in Surucucus and that, through these means, the law would be respected. what he ignored, however, was that the Macuxi have no right to mine on Yanomami lands unless the Yanomami give them permission to do so, and that it is not possible to speak in the name of the Macuxi as a people, who certainly do not agree to "invade" Yanomami lands collectively.

- (1) Referring to his brief imprisonment following the invasion at Surucucus earlier this year.
- (2) The father of Roraima's present governor, a former prospector himself.

Situation Worsens at Ericó and Apiaú

Recent reports indicate that the situations on the Ericó and Apiaú rivers in Yanomami territory are becoming critical as a result of continuing invasions by gold prospectors.

Approximately 300 Yanomami live in the area between the Catrimani and Apiaú rivers and, until recently, they have had little or no contact. Several clandestine prospecting sites have been in operation in the area since 1980 and, despite numerous protests by local missionaries and the Indians themselves, prospectors (garimpeiros) continue to invade the area. This uncontrolled and potentially explosive situation has resulted in several deaths from introduced diseases and numerous conflicts between the Indians and garimpeiros. Early this year, Yanomami warriors along with the Federal and Military Police expelled most of the garimpeiros from the Apiaú region: yet, shortly afterwards, Jose Altino Machado, self-proclaimed leader of the garimpeiros, organized a large-scale and criminal invasion of the Yanomami area, with the full support of several Roraima politicians. By July, over 600 men were illegally prospecting at Apiaú: despite the presence of military police, the garimpeiros continued to penetrate the area. By September, their number had doubled.

The only solution to the grave situation at Apiaú is the immediate removal of all garimpeiros, but the difficulty of access to the region requires the use of a helicopter for this operation. Recently, as a result of pressures from Yanomami leaders, the Minister of Justice promised to initiate this operation, although CCPY fears that it may not be until after elections (15 November) that action will be taken.

On the Ericó River, clandestine prospecting sites have been in operation since the 1960s, but with the opening of the Santa Rosa gold mining area in 1980, the number of garimpeiros increased enormously. At its peak, over 5,000 garimpeiros were working at Santa Rosa and contacts with the Yanomami became completely uncontrolled. Although the Frontier Battalion (BEF)'s presence only reinforced FUNAI's vigilance along the Ericó river, once BEF withdrew from the area the garimpeiros were free to come and go as they wished. The single FUNAI official currently working at the vigilance post is without means to have them removed. It appears now that the garimpeiros have exhausted the minerals around the Santa Rosa area and intend to expand deeper into Yanomami territory. Since early this year, anthropologists and the CCPY have requested the immediate return of BEF in order to patrol the area, in collaboration with FUNAI and the Yanomami of the Ericó.

CCPY Meeting

The CCPY held a 4-day meeting in São Paulo (from 30 September to 3 October) in order to evaluate the ongoing projects of the Commission. Present were the medical

team currently working in Roraima, the CCPY staff in São Paulo, members of UNI, and a representative of the Oswaldo Cruz Medical Foundation from Rio de Janeiro. Among the topics discussed were future plans for the medical program among the Yanomami, directions in the national and international Park campaign, and the current political situation in Roraima.

One of the more important outcomes of the meeting was the suggestion of UNI to help to organize a meeting in the Yanomami area of representatives from several Yanomami communities.