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Brazil: Indigenous people's living in alarming conditions

The Yanomami health care system is collapsing

The Yanomami health care system is facing a serious crisis. In February 2004 the Health Foundation FUNASA and the ministry of health introduced a new concept for the medical care for the Yanomami in the state of Amazonia and took over the responsibility for the respective projects. The working capacity of non-governmental health care institutions among the Yanomami has been severely limited. This led to a severe deterioration in the Yanomami population's health. Furthermore, this reform violates the model of financial and administrative autonomy of the indigenous health districts (Distritos Especiais de Saúde Indígena/DSEI).

As documented by the Pro-Yanomami Commission CCPY and the Yanomami led NGO Hutukara Associação Yanomami, before 2004 the Yanomami health care system was functioning well. CCPY with their Yanomami health organisation URIHI was providing about 50 % of the Yanomami population with medical care. There were almost no new cases of Malaria registered and the infant mortality rate had been reduced by 65 %. Early diagnosis and treatment of Tuberculosis had been optimised to an impressive extent. As a result, the Yanomami population began to increase.

After the 2004 reform, malaria started spreading again. Along the river Marauíá for example, a tributary of the Rio Negro, in eight small villages where 1,442 Yanomami live, cases of malaria had been declining. Suddenly, in 2005 and 2006 the area had the highest malaria-index in the state of Amazonas. This was due to the fact that the Brazilian NGO SECOYA, which works in the Yanomami area on behalf of FUNASA, did not receive adequate funding for four months and thus had to stop all its activities. The Ministry on Public Affairs asked FUNASA to analyse this incident and to explain the causes of the crisis in the Yanomami health system.

Illegal logging in the Ashaninka rainforest in the state of Acre

The Ashaninka in the Brazilian state of Acre have caught logging companies cross the border from Peru illegally. According to reports by organisations such as "Organização dos Povos Indígenas do Rio Juruá" (OPIRJ), "Associação Ashaninka do Rio Amônia" (Apiwtxa) and "Associação Kaxinawá do Rio Breu" (AKARIB), these companies use the dry season to cross the border and cut down trees in the Brazilian rainforest. In July 2007, Isaac Piyãko, a representative

of the Ashaninka and representative of the environment protection agency IBAMA became witnesses to the dramatically fast destruction of the rainforest during a research flight over the Alto Juruá region at the border between Peru and Brazil.

With woodcutters and heavy machinery, logging companies continue to cross the border illegally. They build roads without permission which go through indigenous territories and protected natural habitats. When more roads are built, more forest areas are destroyed. Consequently, the livelihood of the indigenous inhabitants will be depleted. These roads cross the lands of the Ashaninka both on the Peruvian and on the Brazilian side of the border. Wide forest aisles have been cut through the rainforest by companies, plundering the precious wood. The rights of the Ashaninka and their neighbouring tribes and the regulations of environmental protection have been disregarded by these companies.

The Ashaninka fear losing their way of life. This is an urgent situation and the Ashaninka need help in order to stop the ongoing development that threatens to destroy their forests forever. This development drives away game and thus endangers their livelihood. They ask for the support of the state and the federal governments to stop the destruction of rainforest trees and to protect the biodiversity of this unique habitat. They are looking for a team of experts to document the harm that has already been done to the rainforest, the fauna, and the waterways. By doing so, they will be able to bring up an official accusation against the logging companies and the government of Peru, which failed to stop the illegal border crossing despite being informed about the situation.

Small tribes in voluntary isolation

Throughout the entire Amazon border region of Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia there are small indigenous tribes in voluntary isolation. In order to protect their ways of live, peoples like the Tagaeri, Waorani, Taromenane, Corubo, Amamhuaca, Mascho, Kineri, Nanti, Nahua und Kugapakori are retreating further and further into the rainforest in order to avoid contact with foreigners. Recently they have come increasing under pressure due to oil and gas drilling, illegal wood cutting, and expanding soy plantations. These companies displace them further and further into untouched forest that is depleting and becoming smaller every day. The companies are turning more and more parts of untouched forest areas into economic zones and thereby threaten to destroy the last retreats of these small tribes. Rivers and forest have been poisoned. Employees of companies and plantations have introduced diseases which the indigenous peoples are not immune. Protected reservations for these peoples, which are big enough to guarantee the survival of their livelihood, are urgently needed. Fortunately, Brazil has already begun creating such areas, but there is a great need for many more.

Transposição

Transposição is part of the national development plan PAC, a highly controversial project affecting the land rights of indigenous peoples in many parts of Brazil. In the course of the Transposição plans, the river São Francisco, which runs over several thousand kilometres through the states of Minas Gerais, Bahia, Sergipe, Alagoas and Pernambuco before it flows into the Atlantic Ocean, will partly be diverted to build two channels of 400 km and 220 km length in order to create a network of dams and power stations, aqueducts, tunnels and reservoirs. This will cause a dramatic change in the water balance and thus severely threaten

the way of life for the inhabitants of 34 indigenous communities and more than 153 Quilombolas (settlements of Afro-Brazilians). They make their living as small farmers and fishermen and are dependent on a certain water level. These communities were not involved in the planning and decision-making of the project. Thereby Brazil is violating the mechanisms of C169 INDIGENOUS AND TRIBAL PEOPLES CONVENTION of the International Labour Organisation which Brazil ratified in 2002.

Even though the project is meant to support the citizens of the dry Brazilian Northeast with water, only 4% of the diverted water will in fact supply the households in need. 70% of the water will support plantations of sugar cane and fruit trees, which need enormous amounts of water for irrigation, as well as crab cultivation industries – they are all produce mainly for exporting. Another 26% is to provide the industrial region of Fortaleza with water. Therefore, the World Bank refused to grant a credit for the Transposição, because this project is not appropriate in reducing poverty.

Despite all the given information, the work on the first channel started in summer 2007. The first indigenous inhabitants, about 9.000 Tumbalalá and Truka people have been affected by the project. For eight days, 1.500 Indians, Quilombos, poor farmers and fishermen occupied part of the building site on June 26, 2007. They would have been thankful if president Lula da Silva would give proof to his declared willingness to meliorate the situation of the poor by advising the authorities to resume the dialogue with the indigenous peoples and other abutters of the Rio São Francisco affected by the Transposição, and thus fulfill the obligations Brazil complied to by ratifying the C169 INDIGENOUS AND TRIBAL PEOPLES CONVENTION of the International Labour Organisation.

Soybean and sugar cane plantations causing conflicts between big land owners and indigenous peoples

Brazil is a leading country in the production of Biofuels. Together with the US, Brazil controls 70% of the world market of Ethanol. In Brazil, Ethanol is produced from sugar cane which is grown on huge plantations – the ownership of which is often disputed with neighbouring indigenous communities. Ethanol production is a booming industry – but not only at the expense of Indigenous peoples but also the environment. Before being replanted, sugar cane fields are burned down. Consequently, 64.8 million tons of carbon dioxide is released into the air (Department of ecology of Brazil, 2002). This smoke contains carcinogenic substances which can cause lung cancer. In addition, sugar cane and soybeans are grown with huge amounts of fertilizer and pesticides which pollute the soils and groundwater.

Indigenous peoples are affected by the Biofuel industry in many ways. In Mato Grosso do Sul 37.000 Kaiowa-Guarani Indians are struggling to defend their land rights against the owners of large sugar cane estates. Their demarcation process has been delayed time and time again. The 9.316 hectare land of the Kaiowá-Guarani community of Nhandaru Marangatu in the Antonio João municipality, Mato Grosso do Sul state, for example, were officially ratified by president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on 23 March, 2005. After a judicial challenge at state level, the then president of the Federal Supreme Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal, STF) Nelson Jobim, suspended the president's ruling, keeping the resolution of the appeal pending. On December 15, 2005, 150 military police officers enforced an eviction order, using helicopters and heavy arms, driving the community into an encampment of makeshift shacks by the side of the highway.

Today (November 2007), the Kaiowá-Guarani are daunted by 30 private security guards who work for local landowners. They have repeatedly threatened the community by firing shots in the air. The security guards have also been accused of having raped three indigenous women this year. The atmosphere of constant fear and intimidation is preventing the Guarani Kaiowá from continuing their daily lives. In their last Guarani community meeting which took place from 26 to 28 October 2007 in the Sombreiro village, Marangatu leaders complained that the security guards were making it impossible to live there. They called on the Federal Supreme Court to rule on the registration of their lands.

Prospects for employment at the ethanol plants are not promising. The Indians work as day labourers in the fields or at the ethanol plants under conditions close to slavery. As Egon Heck from the Brazilian NGO Conselho Missionário Indigenista (Cimi) reported, many suffer from spine damage. Normally, they do not earn enough to feed their families. They urgently need land to be able to lead a self-sustained life again. Therefore, the demarcation process for all indigenous peoples' territories in Brazil should be accelerated and considered a top priority. Demarcated lands should be protected from judicial challenges. Experts fear that the growing sugar cane plantations push cattle breeders and soy farmers further and further into the rainforest and thus threaten the indigenous peoples' survival even more.