

## Indian tribes of the Amazon

*In some of the remote areas of the Amazon, there are still Indian tribes who have never had contact with white men. The Brazilian government agency that deals with indigenous peoples, FUNAI, has recently changed its policy with respect to contacting these tribes. This is a talk about some of the reasons for this.*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Amazon Basin, the area drained by the Amazon River and its tributaries, covers an enormous area of jungle. The largest part of the Amazon Basin is in Brazil, but it extends into several other South American countries as well.

The Amazon Basin contains valuable natural resources, and as a result, for 500 years, white men have come to the Amazon, first in search of gold and slaves, later looking for rubber, timber, and farmland.

For Brazil's Indian population, the results have been devastating. Once, the Indians of the Amazon numbered in the millions. Today there are only about 350,000 Indians left in the entire Amazon Basin.

Even when the white men did not come as conquerors, but only attempted to establish friendly contact with the Indians, all too often the result was disastrous. One reason was that the Indians were vulnerable to infectious diseases, such as the common cold, against which they had no biological defenses. Sometimes more than half the members of a tribe would die of such epidemics in the months following contact.

Another problem is that when the Indians begin to visit the towns of the white settlers, they develop new needs and desires created by the white society. To acquire consumer goods, they need money, so they begin to sell off the timber on their tribal lands to the big logging companies, despoiling their own lands in the process.

This is why, during the last ten years or so, the Brazilian government agency that deals with indigenous peoples (FUNAI) has changed its policy. It no longer attempts to contact isolated Indian tribes unless the Indians themselves take the initiative. On the contrary, FUNAI tries to keep outsiders away from the Indians.

[To do this, FUNAI scouts have to go into the unexplored, remote regions of the Amazon, on the borders between Brazil, Columbia and Peru, where there are still Indian tribes that have never been contacted by white men, and map out the areas where these tribes live. They can then police the boundaries and keep outsiders from encroaching on the tribe's territory. But they try to do this without actually ever meeting the Indians themselves.]

There are many people who disagree with this policy: gold miners, timber companies, settlers looking for farmland, even missionaries who want to save souls. Many people say the development of the Amazon Basin is inevitable, so why try to stop it? But FUNAI can at least buy some time for the Amazon Indians, allowing them to make the first contact with modern society at their own pace.

Thank you.

(428 words)