
Brazil: Indigenous Amazon people forced into contact

In May this year, a group of indigenous people who had remained in voluntary isolation established contact with the outside world. This happened in the north of the State of Para. The indigenous people walked for 5 days for over 100 kilometres through the dense Amazon forest, crossing the frontier from Mato Grosso until unexpectedly appearing in an indigenous Kayapo village.

It should be noted that this contact was not the result of a free decision but because of loggers invading their territory, forcing them to flee and make this long and difficult journey until they reached this village.

They are a group of 87 indigenous Metyktire people, a sub-group of the Kayapo – who were initially contacted in 1950 but at the time decided to re-enter the forest and chose to remain in voluntary isolation until now.

According to reports, the first contact was made by two men who made noises at the back of one of the houses in the village and were seen by two young men. After overcoming the initial mistrust resulting from this unexpected encounter, the rest of the group gradually entered the Kayapo village.

As a precautionary measure, it has been decided that only members of the village can have contact with the Metyktire, as a way of preventing contagion from diseases that these people have no immunological defences against. The village members are indigenous people of the same ethnic group who made first contact with white people in 1950. The leader of the village, -Megaron Txucarramãe- who is also the FUNAI (National Indigenous Foundation of Brazil) representative - is in charge of communicating with the new arrivals. According to FUNAI, there is still no information as to whether there are any injured or dead Metyktire members in the forest, or if they have simply decided not to come out.

The Metyktire were thought to have disappeared and nothing was known about their whereabouts. They were received with much rejoicing and singing and dancing by the Kayapo. There are still no pictures available but their songs were recorded and played over the local radio and can be listened to at <http://www.survival-international.org/news/2462>). The reports say that the Metyktire speak a much purer version of Mebengokré (the Kayapó language), they are tall and strong, with long hair and have a “botoque” (lip plate) on their bottom lip.

According to Gilberto Hazaña and Sydney Possuelo from the Centre for Indigenist Work, the indigenous people in voluntary isolation are peoples that “...throughout this time (500 years!), have sought isolated regions or taken refuge there, or more rightly stated, have sought regions that were not coveted by the commercial (or missionary) cruelty of our ‘expansion frontiers’. In the Amazon, (mainly the Brazilian Amazon, but also the Bolivian, Peruvian, Colombian, Venezuelan, Ecuadorian and Guyanese Amazon) we estimate that there are still dozens of indigenous peoples living in almost the same way as they did five, six, seven or one thousand years ago: dressed in feathers or loincloths, surviving on hunting, fishing, gathering and small scale agriculture, using stone axes and fire. They do not have viral diseases and live in a fully abundant environment. It is a fact

that today most of the peoples in isolation in the Amazon are subject to an extremely serious situation because of the advance of predatory fronts (logging and mining) on the region's last virgin areas."

This recent contact of the Metyktire people provides a good opportunity to reflect and think about the future of these peoples, setting aside the folkloric and the sensationalist coverage made by most of the media.

The first point to reflect on is that they did not establish contact of their own free will. On the contrary, the first versions reported that they were escaping from loggers and that they had fled through the dense forest for 5 days until they finally established contact with their Kayapo relatives. This means that they could have been shot dead by the loggers – as has often been the case – leaving no traces behind them. Fortunately however, they were able to escape.

At the same time, many questions arise: what is the future of these communities that are forced to make contact with an outside world where commercialism is rife and where what is of most interest in this story are the pictures of the indigenous people with their bare bodies and lip plates? What will be the future of these communities when they become members of a world – and a country – where racism is prevalent and where most of the indigenous peoples live in extreme poverty? What is the future of the dozens of communities still living in the forest – particularly in Brazil – whose territories are handed over to logging, mining and oil companies in the name of the country's "development and economic growth?"

However, perhaps the most important question: is what can we do to ensure the rights of these peoples and to enable them to choose freely either to live in isolation or not?

In this respect, we consider that the first step is to make their existence known and to understand and respect their decision to live in isolation. To make people understand that they are not ignorant peoples living in poverty, but peoples with their own culture, adapted to making a sustainable use of the "fully abundant environment" in which they live.

At the same time, it is essential to get the governments to recognize the territorial rights of these people – who were there before the existence of the present national states – and to ensure that they are respected, preventing entry into their territories of loggers, miners and other agents of destruction.

These peoples are not in a position to defend their ancestral territories from the well-armed and unscrupulous external agents without the support of outside society and will only have the choice between contacts against their will, or disappearance. For this reason, we appeal to all of you, and in particular to the peoples of the Amazon countries, to step up efforts to protect the rights of the indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation.

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