

**Open letter from members of
the Uncontacted and Recently Contacted Indians Unit
at FUNAI (the Brazilian government's Indigenous Affairs Department)**

Brazil's 1988 Constitution guarantees the right to self-determination of uncontacted indigenous peoples. This recognition means that the State should respect these peoples' strategies of establishing limited and controlled contact and interaction with other people. The International Labour Organization's Convention 169, to which Brazil is a signatory, reinforces the State's position.

Since 1987, FUNAI has worked to protect uncontacted indigenous peoples, in order to respect their autonomy. This work consists of research into, and finding evidence of, the presence of uncontacted people (involving analysing satellite imagery, information collection, and more), field expeditions (to understand how uncontacted peoples use and occupy their land), registering their land [mapping and physically marking out the boundaries for their exclusive use] and permanently monitoring their territories (through protection posts and controlling illegal activity). This work, as practised and improved over the years, has proven to be efficient. The populations of uncontacted indigenous peoples in the Massaco, Vale do Javari, Kawahiva do Rio Pardo, Hi-Merimã and Kaxinawa do Rio Jordão indigenous territories, for example, have seen a marked population increase after three decades of this kind of work. This proves that the policy of respecting these peoples' self-determination is viable and effective in the short, medium and long term.

Given that there is currently a wide debate underway in academic arenas and on social media about public policies to protect uncontacted peoples in the Amazon Basin, we feel compelled to express our disagreement with the ideas of some anthropologists, especially those published last year in a Science magazine editorial, in which the anthropologists argue that "controlled contact" is the only possible strategy for protecting these peoples. We believe that this attitude fails to consider the autonomy of uncontacted peoples to determine for themselves how they live, and therefore is problematic and must be raised.

It is worth remembering that the practices Brazil adopted during the intense economic expansion of the 1970s and 1980s resulted in widespread disintegration and population loss for indigenous peoples who, until then, had been uncontacted. This led to harmful effects which can still be seen clearly in these peoples' demography. In this context, implementing "controlled contact" as a means of protection – now suggested again by some North American anthropologists – would prevent just some of these negative effects from happening. Our understanding, however, is that there is never absolute control in any contact situation, even when the teams have all the resources they need to operate efficiently. Furthermore, as already mentioned, "controlled" contact would constitute a severe violation of these peoples' right to determine their own lives.

However, what is happening is that FUNAI's current work has suffered continual blows, especially in relation to its budget and human resources. Linked to this is the paradox that the population increase of uncontacted peoples during the almost three decades during which the current policy has been implemented, together with the advance of economic frontiers in Amazonia, has created new challenges for the enforcement of the State's work for indigenous people, and for

civil society organizations and organizations representing indigenous peoples. One of the challenges which has arisen from this combination of factors is the increase in frequency of contact situations where uncontacted peoples share territories with indigenous peoples who have already established systematic relations with surrounding society.

In this context, while we stick by and reaffirm our policy of not making contact, we believe that the Brazilian State must reorganize itself for the possibility of an increase in contact situations. It is therefore necessary to perfect the existing norms and methodologies for intervention in case of contact. However, this does not necessarily imply that there will be changes in the paradigm of public policy regarding the autonomy of uncontacted indigenous peoples.

Finally, we reject any hasty actions which publicize information in a rash and inconsistent way about contact situations and the performance of FUNAI teams, thus doing a disservice to the effective protection of uncontacted and recently contacted peoples. Decontextualized criticisms of the performance of the teams results in the weakening of the public policies which they are implementing.

We recognize the limitations of the State, in terms of budget and infrastructure, when dealing with the challenges arising from the increasing pressure on the territories inhabited by uncontacted indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, we do not offer or support defeatist arguments which assume that it is inevitable that economic interests override indigenous peoples' rights, and which suggest that contact is the only solution to ensure these peoples' survival. Conscious of the challenges ahead, the teams of [FUNAI's] Ethno-environmental Protection Fronts and the General Coordination Unit of Uncontacted and Recently Contacted Indians will not shirk from always maintaining open and frank dialogue with society, seeking to successfully implement our work and to constantly improve public policies regarding uncontacted indigenous peoples.

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