

# Survival's reaction to the alleged Yanomami 'massacre': questions and answers

Survival has been accused of a 'climbdown' over its announcement that, apparently contrary to earlier reports, a Yanomami settlement in Venezuela has *not* been destroyed in an attack by goldminers. Survival director Stephen Corry responds to questions.

*Survival now says that the Yanomami settlement of Irotatheri has not been massacred. Why this change?*

Stephen Corry: Yanomami had told their organization in Venezuela that illegal miners had attacked Irotatheri, killing many people and burning houses. There was no reason to disbelieve them, and we released the reports internationally. I stand absolutely by this decision, for which I take full and personal responsibility: to have acted otherwise would have been a dereliction of duty. We made nothing up; we made it clear where the reports came from. As soon as we knew that this had not happened as reported, we released that too.

*Didn't you say that 80 people had been killed?*

Stephen Corry: No, we said, 'Initial reports suggest up to 80 people have been killed, but these numbers are impossible to confirm.' The Indians gave this as the total population of the settlement in question, and clearly thought many people *had* been killed.

*Shouldn't you have investigated further before launching the accusation?*

Stephen Corry: No, our role was to assess and then transmit the information given to us by the Indian organization, not immediately to call it into question. We made it clear that the report was not corroborated.

*Why did you believe it?*

Stephen Corry: We know that the area is swarming with illegal goldminers and we know such people have killed Yanomami before. The

report was entirely credible and, to a large extent, remains so.

*So why do you not believe it now?*

Stephen Corry: Our own investigation has shown that the particular settlement has not been destroyed. It's possible that there *was* an attack, but on a different settlement. Yanomami community names often include several settlements originating from the same place – a wider community of several settlements all carrying one name. (A bit like the city and state both being called 'New York'.) I say this not as an excuse, but as simple fact.

*How do you know the settlement hasn't been destroyed?*

Stephen Corry: From confidential, reliable and expert sources of our own, independent of government or media.

*Isn't this a climbdown?*

Stephen Corry: No. We are delighted that the settlement wasn't destroyed. Let me stress, we are *not* saying there was *no* violent incident which gave rise to these reports. It remains likely. *All* we are now saying is that this particular place has not been razed.

*But the government said this before you did, why didn't you believe it?*

Stephen Corry: The government made its announcement before it had even reached the settlement. Many people – including in Venezuela – thought this was a cover-up. Government supporters attacked Survival for

being a ‘fascist’ organization, when they couldn’t possibly have known what had occurred in the region, and clearly don’t understand what Survival is.

*But you did accuse the Venezuela government of a cover-up, don’t you owe it an apology?*

Stephen Corry: No, there *is* a cover-up. A Venezuelan general has been reported as claiming there are no illegal miners, and that the Yanomami are in a ‘perfect state’, in ‘peace and harmony’. None of this is true, as the army has known for years. The area is full of miners and illegal activities are rife. The authorities have gone to lengths to pretend everything is fine. It isn’t: it’s a tinderbox and the Indians are the victims. It’s not the first time violence has been reported, and some Yanomami have been poisoned. If Venezuela actually believes its own laws, it must evict those invading indigenous territory – there and everywhere else in the country – and stop pretending all is harmony, which is both absurd and tragic.

*Will this prompt you to review how you release information?*

Stephen Corry: Perfect foresight would obviously alter one’s behaviour, but this incident won’t affect our systems. We have followed this type of issue for over 40 years; we will continue to make sensible assessments based on our experience. We need to react speedily to news of killings: if they are not publicised quickly, it can encourage the killers. We acted correctly and we know that some miners have now left the immediate area (probably only temporarily), at the same time as the government’s team was coming in. If we had reason to doubt the reports, then of course we would have held back. For example, if we thought the Indian organisation was incompetent, or had other interests, or if we knew there were no miners in the area, we would have obviously judged the reports differently. To our knowledge, Indians have not

invented attacks on themselves – why should they? They are all too common.

*So what do you think happened?*

Stephen Corry: Let me stress, *it remains likely that this story has a basis in fact*. The most likely scenario is that there was a violent incident between miners and Indians and that the facts were garbled, misunderstood, or just not reported with the precision everyone wants. It’s worth remembering that most such incidents go unreported, and that names and numbers are not used in the same way by Indians as they would be by a lawyer or academic. It’s also worth remembering that what really happened in even major conflicts between *literate* peoples – those which are subject to intense academic scrutiny – can still be confused and take years, even decades, to emerge. Discounting missionaries, the outsider with the most intimate knowledge of the Yanomami is probably Bruce Albert, a French social scientist who speaks their language and has worked with them since the 1970s. He says, ‘To discount the alleged massacre as just ‘rumours’ is to deny the self-evident seriousness of the situation. Yanomami stories like this are not just inventions, but rather a reflection of deep anxieties and tensions about real events. The only way to uncover the truth is with a proper expert investigation, not just brief visits to a few settlements. It will take time.’

*Won’t this make it easier for your enemies – and those of tribal peoples – to deny your reports in the future?*

Stephen Corry: It’ll give them a shot in the arm, yes. However, we have been attacked constantly, and for decades, by those trying to steal indigenous land and resources, and by those who just believe the whole world must follow a ‘Western model of development’, like it or not. We will not be giving up!

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