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Primeiro Encontro Internacional das Nações Amazônicas sobre Povos Isolados

John Hemming

In November 2005, Sydney Possuelo organized a 'Primeiro Encontro Internacional das Nações Amazônicas sobre Povos Isolados' in Belém do Para. This was supported by the Moore Foundation, and contained official delegations from all the Amazonian countries - Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela, as well as Paraguay. There were perhaps 200 attendees, and proceedings were of course entirely in Portuguese and Spanish.

(As I'm sure you know, Sydney Possuelo - a former president of FUNAI - created and ran its Departamento de Povos Indígenas Isolados.)

Sydney flew me from the UK and Patrick Menget from France to give the two keynote talks at the start of the conference. In my speech I gave an overview of all the major contacts during the second half of the twentieth century. I showed how, all too often, the initial contact by sertanistas had gone reasonably well. But with every contacted people, disgraceful lack of medical follow-up or preventive medicine had meant decimation by disease within a few years.

I recall two interesting aspects of that first (and so far only) international conference on this delicate subject. One was that several of the official national delegations contained indigenous people who had been born before contact, lived through that traumatic experience, and were now speaking eloquently in a second language. The other was that all the participating countries declared that their official policy was to leave isolated peoples alone for as long as possible. They would attempt contact only if there was an extreme threat, and of course only in the interest of the people being contacted. Luckily almost all the remaining isolated peoples were thought to live in forests that already enjoyed protection as indigenous territories or other reserves.

There was a good report on the situation of isolated peoples in each of the countries, issued to delegates at the conference. And I think that its proceedings and agreed resolutions were also published subsequently.