

Fighting for a Macuxi Homeland

Macuxi leader Jacir José de Souza is a well known Indigenous activist from the Raposa Serra do Sol Indian area, Brazil. After 25 grueling years of work, this area has yet to be demarcated and has been the site of numerous killings and human rights violations (see Noticias de Abya Yala, Vol. 9 No. 1). Now, the revocation of Decree 22/91 puts a cloud over the prospects of official demarcation. In this interview, not yet knowing the outcome of the revision of Decree 22/91, Jacir confides in SAIIC the hardships faced by the Macuxi people and the often conflicting process of organization and representation that occurs in a common struggle.

Interview with Jacir José De Souza

Why and how did you start fighting for the Macuxi people?

I'm from the *maloca* (village) of Maturuca, in the state of Roraima, Brazil. Our land had been invaded, but the *tuxaua* (chief) of our *Maloca* wasn't responding. On April 27, 1987, we had a meeting and I was chosen to lead the effort to defend our community, to replace the *Tuxaua* of the *maloca*. Our first step was ending alcoholism, which the *garimpeiros* (gold prospectors) were bringing into our community. Then, we started to organize other communities and work with the other *Tuxaus*. Still, they thought I was new, and lacked experience. I argued that, for the future, we had to take action on our own behalf. The government was never going to do anything. FUNAI wouldn't help us. Our efforts continued; communities started helping each other, clearing fields, building houses.

I took this experience of working with the *Tuxaus* to the annual general assembly. I chose four people in my *maloca* (village), went to the assembly, and told all the *Tuxaus* about the village council we had formed. The reaction was pretty negative: They said, "What, you won't respect the *Tuxaua* any more, and there won't be a legitimate authority?" But, when they saw the results of our work, they agreed to unite and work together.

In 1987, we decided to extend our organization to the city to work for the demarcation of our land. I suggested 12 people, from all the communities, to start. In April, 1987, we went to all the *malocas*, explaining what we wanted to do, that in Maturuca we already had a council, and that this was for the future of our children. The people agreed.

After one month we went to the city. We had no house or anything. FUNAI didn't want to help us. So, we went to talk with a bishop, Don Aldo Mongiano, and he said he could provide a house we could use. We divided up the work. Three people stayed in the city, and the others returned to the *malocas*. After a while, the process was reversed. We set up a place where people could go for help.

After two years, everyone was with us. I was in the middle of everything. We bought another house for an office in Boa Vista. People brought food from the villages. We put together a small project that received support.

In 1988, we had a meeting in Manaus with COIAB (Brazilian Indigenous Peoples and Organizations Articulating Council). There was an election, and six people were chosen including me. I told them I didn't have enough experience, and that this is a

very big city. But, they convinced me and told me it would be fine.

By 1990, we were doing well. Then, there was an outbreak of malaria in my *maloca*. Many people fell sick. My wife was one of them, and she died. When I got back to Boa Vista, they wanted me to work for the Council, but I said I had to take care of my children. When I got back to the *maloca*, they said you can't leave. A *Tuxaua* is a *Tuxaua*.

After four months, they chose me to coordinate the region, where there are 5,000 people in 48 villages. I agreed to coordinate things from my home.

Our organization, the Indigenous Council of Roraima (CIR), now has diverse personnel, including a lawyer and an agronomist. Since we divided up into eight regions, some stay in their areas while others work in the city. Now, we are even travelling to other countries. In September, the vice-coordinator went to Italy where he met with other organizations.

Today, I am here. Our work to defend our rights continues.

What are the principal problems faced by Macuxi communities?

At the beginning of 1995, the state government wanted to build a dam on the Cotingo River, within the Indian area Raposa Serra do Sol. They sent the mili-

tary police who destroyed a house, beat up the *Tuxaua*, and kicked people out and burned a house. We resisted. We held that it was illegal to do this in an Indigenous area. We contacted the attorney general and FUNAI. We explained how they had beaten many people. Later, the federal government decided to bring in energy from Venezuela, so things calmed down.

The state government was doing this to hold up the demarcation [of our land]. The army came into the area, also destroying houses. We had a meeting and called the military and little by little they left.

Then in October, they proposed creating a town, a municipality within Raposa Serra do Sol. How could they get away with this? They called for a plebiscite and scheduled a day to hold it. They brought electronic voting machines. The ranchers and miners voted, as well as the Indians.

In another plebiscite a year ago the results were annulled because the Indians knew about it, and being well-organized, boycotted it. Now they pulled a new maneuver, announcing the plebiscite with only two days of advance notice. The Indians didn't have a chance to organize. They brought computers, which people had not seen before. Needing assistance, they could not vote in privacy. Now, they say they will build a city near Maturuca. We believe this is to destabilize the Indian movement, and to prevent the demarcation of the area.

So, I'm very concerned. It's a very serious problem.

How many years have *garimpeiros* been inside the area?

It's been about 25 years. They started working manually. Then, machinery was brought in. In the last seven years, they brought in dredging equipment, destroying the rivers, polluting them with mercury, leaving them filthy.

When the federal government took the miners out of the Yanomami area in 1989-90, many came to the Macuxi area. This was when *salci-parum* malaria—the most serious kind—became rampant.



Photo: Greg Roney, Amazonia & Amazon Network

Jacir Jose de Souza (right) during Amazon Week VI, 1995, during a panel on Indigenous Rights.

We built a blockade and stayed there months, not letting anyone or any vehicles pass. Then, FUNAI sent the federal police in 1992 to expel everyone. We managed to kick out 600 *garimpeiros*. The ranchers inside the area also began to leave. One of the meanest, named Jai, left after destroying many of our houses. Now, this area is clean, and the forest is beginning to grow.

So, today, there are very few cattle inside. But, with the support of the state government, some remained. Now, there is a lot of pressure to establish a municipality. The fight is getting serious, and we can't give in.

Did you speak with Minister Jobim?

It's difficult. We've tried three times to schedule a meeting. We tried to speak to the president in New York, but we couldn't. Some of our members have spoken with the minister, but hear that he is going to sign the decree [decree 1.775].

...and the state government?

The state government, through buying off some of our people and giving them small presents like clothes, got the Indians to say that "the government is

helping us." But this is in the city of Boa Vista, where many Indians are suffering, and can't go back to their village.

Have you received the support from non-Indigenous populations in Roraima?

In any city in Brazil, there are people defending our rights. There are journalists who help us. The church also supports us. FUNAI also sent a decree to the minister recognizing our territorial limits. And, there are many organizations—CIMI (Indigenist Missionary Council), that organization in São Paulo, the CPI (Pro-Indian Commission), in Rio de Janeiro.

So, we're working together. Any place we go, we find allies. But, powerful people with more money stay on top.

What can people here do to help the Macuxi people?

On this trip, I've met other organizations like RAN (Rainforest Action Network), and asked for their help to speak with the government here. People can send letters asking our government to respect Indian people. Everyone can pressure the US government here also.

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What has been the response of people in the cities of Brazil? Are they aware of the situation?

I think that there is some activity. There is talk of organizing a protest in Brasilia. When there is money to bring 300-400 Indians to Brasilia, there is always little time to plan.

What is the situation regarding the construction of the government dam on the Cotingo River?

The construction of the dam was suspended, and electricity will be brought in from Venezuela instead. But, we don't know what will happen later on.

Is the border area heavily militarized?

The military is in Normandia and B-8. They want to build a town, and they keep coming through the area, helping the ranchers, burning an Indian home here and there.

How about in Indigenous areas?

Calha Norte included a base within Raposa/Serra do Sol, but they don't have money to build it yet. The military has declared itself against demarcation of Indian lands, and supports local interests. They built a blockade on the only road that links the cities with the malocas, and asserted the right to search entering Indians to intimidate them.

Are Indian lands subject to organized invasions by large companies, or small landless farmers and miners?

The larger economic interests have plans to get into the area. They want to get the miners out, so they can come in. But, we don't want anyone to come in. ☹

Send faxes to President Fernando Henrique Cardoso asking him to guarantee the demarcation of Indigenous areas in Brazil, and to revoke Decree 1775:

Fernando Henrique Cardoso, President of the Republic, Palácio do Planalto, Brasília - DF - 70.160-900, Fax: 55-61-226-7566, email: pr@cr-df.rnp.br