

Brazil: Macuxi People Oppose Building of Dam

The Raposa/Serra do Sol region along Brazil's border with Venezuela and Guyana is home to 11,000 Macuxi and 3,000 Ingarikó Indians. Like other Indigenous peoples throughout Brazil, the Macuxi have been seeking demarcation of their land. FUNAI, the government's Indian agency, identified their land as Indigenous in 1993, but the government has not yet signed the order. Meanwhile, gold miners and squatters have invaded the Macuxi's land, bringing malaria to the region and destroying the environment. At the same time the Macuxi and Ingarikó have successfully campaigned against a dam project in their region that would have flooded nearly 4,000 hectares of land. This dam would have changed their traditional lifestyle and severely limited their freedom to hunt, fish, and gather.

In 1992, the state electricity company (CER) began to study the Indian lands known as Raposa/Serra do Sol for a hydroelectric dam project on the Contingo River. The study claimed that only 45 Indians would be affected. Alternative studies maintain that 3,400 Indigenous people would be affected by the construction of the dam.

The Macuxi campaign to stop construction of this dam was met with force by the state military. On January 7, 1995, 50 Roraima state military police and seven members of the army invaded the Tamandua livestock holding camp of the Macuxi Indigenous community of Caraparu II in order to illegally

expel nearly 400 men, women, and children from their land. Two Macuxi Indians were severely beaten. Others were kicked, harassed, and detained. The police destroyed three houses, a cattle corral, and a livestock pen.

The following week, 170 Macuxi returned to the livestock holding area and began to work there. Twelve military policemen came and destroyed hammocks, food, and cooking implements. When the Macuxi attempted to stop this destruction, the police allegedly beat several Indians and fired at their possessions.

In protest of this expulsion, Macuxi communities from other parts of Roraima gathered at Caraparu II. Federal police report that military police have intimidated Macuxi communities by flying over their villages in helicopters and pointing weapons down at the Indians. According to a statement released by the Indian Council of Roraima state, "The motive for the invasion was to guarantee the construction of the hydroelectric dam on the River Contingo."

The Macuxi persisted in their opposition and sent a delegation to the federal capital of Brasília to protest the violence the state military police of Roraima used against them. They also demanded immediate demarcation of their lands. On March 17, a federal court issued a restraining order halting the construction of the Contingo River dam project. But the Macuxi land has not yet been demarcated. Army personnel sent to Raposa/Serra do Sol to protect the Macuxi have

sided with the gold miners and squatters, and have continued to intimidate Macuxi people.

Because of the activities of the gold miners, fish in nearby rivers have disappeared, and those that remain have high levels of mercury. In addition, the stagnant pits of water left by miners have introduced malaria in epidemic proportions. Malaria has become the main cause of death of the Macuxi.

Throughout Brazil, Indigenous peoples continue to fight for land demarcation. Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso has the power to sign into law the rights of Indigenous peoples to their traditional ancestral lands. Because of pressure from local politicians, he has not yet signed this decree. ☺

SAIIC has sent faxes supporting the Macuxi's demand for land demarcation and denouncing human rights abuses. We encourage you to do the same. Please write letters demanding that the Brazilian government demarcate traditional Indigenous lands to:

President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Palácio do Planalto, 70.159-970, Brasília DF, Brazil, Fax: 55 61 226 7566

Exmo. Sr. Ministro da Justiça, Sr. Nelson Jobim, Ministério da Justiça, Esplanada dos Ministérios, Bloco 23, 70.064, Brasília DF, Brazil, Fax: 55 61 224 2448

Send copies showing your support to:

The Indigenous Council of Roraima, Conselho Indígena de Roraima, Caixa Postal 163, 70.300 Boa Vista, RR, Brazil

Information from Amnesty International's Urgent Action Appeal, CIMI (Indianist Missionary Council), SEJUP (Serviço Brasileiro de Justiça e Paz), and the Urgent Action Bulletin of Survival International.