

Suicide Before Eviction



photo: J.R. Ripper/ Imagens da terra

Guarani-Kaiowa family in Mato Grosso do Sul wait along a road crossing the land that was theirs

An entire community of Guarani-Kaiowa people in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, threaten to commit collective suicide if a Federal court's order to expel them from their ancestral lands is carried out. This May, Marta Vitor Guarani, president of the Kaguatoca Association for Displaced Indians travelled to the US to make the situation of her people known to the international community.

"How long will we have to wait for the Brazilian justice system to give us rights to our land?" questioned Marta Vitor Guarani at a press conference in San Francisco. Over 11,000 Indigenous people including Guarani-Kaiowa, Nandeva and M'bya have lost their lands in the state to invasions by ranchers supported by sympathetic courts and police forces. Indigenous lands in the state have halved over the last decade, now total-

ling less than 25,000 hectares. "It is always the ranchers who win in the courts, while Indians end up without any respect for our land rights. But Indians are like plants, how can we live without our soil, without our land," asked Vitor Guarani. She notes that landless Indians are left nothing but misery. "Over seven thousand Indians are working in the charcoal factories and in the sugar cane processing plants. They live in a state of slavery. This is

the integration that white society offers us. But we Indians, the first owners of this land, cannot accept this humiliating and inhuman integration."

Land Expulsions and Mass Suicide

The Guarani, Vitor says, "are the poorest people, the most abandoned people in Brazil." In their desperation, many, especially youths, have turned to suicide. Indian organizations claim

that approximately 300 people have committed suicide over the last ten years. The Brazilian government's own estimate puts the number at 111 between the years of 1986-1993. Marta's community, Poste Indígena Dorados, has seen the greatest concentration of Indigenous suicides in the country.

One-hundred and six Guarani-Kaiowa families from the community of Jaguapire in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul are threatening collective suicide if a Federal court's order to expel them from their lands is carried out. Marta states, "The area has already been demarcated and legalized, but with no guarantees, and this could be the fourth time, that the Indigenous people of Jaguapire are expelled, which would be very serious, because the mothers have decided that they will give poison to the children and later kill themselves [rather than be moved]." At the end of last year the community of Jaguapire sent a letter to FUNAI (the Brazilian agency for Indian affairs) affirming that they had chosen to die rather than be evicted. A federal court postponed the community's eviction out of consideration for these circumstances, but the court's final decision is still pending.

In 1992, the community's 2,089 hectare area was declared a permanent Guarani-Kaiowa possession by the Brazilian minister of justice. It's demarcation was confirmed by the President of the Republic. Nonetheless, under Brazil's peculiar system for titling land to Indian communities, anyone else wishing to present counter claims is given a lengthy period and multiple opportunities to do so. Legal challenges filed at any time in the process can be pursued for many years, even after lands are demarcated and ratified as Indigenous possessions.

In Jaguapire and elsewhere, this has meant Indian loss of previously demarcated lands. Indigenous communities must prove with physical evidence that they have the longest record of inhabitation for contested lands. In the case of Jaguapire, evidence shows that the Guarani-Kaiowa have been burying

their dead on these lands for at least 90 years, while the rancher claiming the lands arrived only ten years ago. In many cases however, evidence is more difficult to find. Journalist Ripper notes, "ranchers are accustomed to run their tractors over the cemeteries to obliterate any sign that there were Indian people there."

Despite being the most populous Indigenous people in Brazil, the Guarani now subsist on the smallest pieces of Indian land in the country, and are submitted to the most brutal social and economic conditions. The giant region of forest and savannah once used by the Guarani for hunting, fishing and agriculture has been subdivided and reduced to degraded pasture by wealthy landowners, often with the help of State subsidies. Land ownership in Mato Grosso do Sul is arguably the most concentrated on earth, with 1% of the population owning 70% of all lands.

The Guarani are divided into three groups: the Nandeva, Kaiowá and

M'bya, and live throughout Southern Brazil from the state of Espírito Santo to Rio Grande do Sul. However, the vast majority live in Mato Grosso do Sul. Pressures on the Guarani lands have intensified as their territories lie within the area of the government's Paraná-Paraguay project which has caused real estate speculation in the region.

Although the case of Jaguapire is one of the most serious, eleven other Guarani communities have also been evicted or are threatened with eviction, and await court decisions as to their fate. In the community of Limon Verde, Marta points out, "people are living under tents without the conditions necessary to live while they await the judge's decision. More than 200 families are there, and they are going through a lot of misery. We can see in their faces since we are Guarani people that they are very sad, extremely sad."

According to the Brazilian Indianist Missionary Council (CIMI) another Guarani-Kaiowa community living in



Marta Vitor Guarani and a companion mourn at her community's cemetery for youths who have killed themselves

photo: J.R. Ripper/ Imagens da terra

central western Mato Grosso do Sul has reoccupied their lands in the previously demarcated 2,745 acre Takuaryty/Ivykuarusu Indian Area. They have been evicted six times from this territory. About 300 Guarani-Kaiowa burned a bridge providing road access to the contested area. Ranchers accuse them of burning a house and school as well, however CIMI notes these were burned by a non-Indian settler in an attempt to provoke military action against the Indians. Military police have occupied the area, although claiming neutrality in the conflict, they have nearly always acted against Indigenous people.

Resistance and Repression

The Kaguatoca Association for Displaced Indians unites all Indigenous groups in the state to reclaim lands of the dispossessed and prevent further evictions. Eleven thousand Indigenous people are displaced in Mato Grosso do Sul, 9,000 of these are Guarani, while the rest belong to other smaller peoples. A great problem facing those who would return to their lands, is the gap between planting and harvest times, since they are starting with no reserves. Kaguatoca is soliciting food support for these communities to help them live until the first harvest. Currently three different communities with a total of 220 people are preparing to reoccupy lands they were previously forced to abandon.

Marta founded the Kaguatoca association for displaced Indians following the assassination of her uncle Marcal Tupa y de Souza in 1983, a highly respected Indigenous leader known as the "poet with lips of honey" for his power with language. This was one of the many hundreds of Indigenous leaders assassinated for resisting land invasions. According to Vitor, "In Brazil, the murder of Indians doesn't shock anymore, not the politicians, nor the government, nor the civilian population." Although several assassinations have been investigated, not one resulted in the killer's conviction until last year when the assassin of Marcal

was finally sentenced. Shortly thereafter, local authorities allowed him to flee the region.

The Guarani fiercely resisted invasion of their lands until being overwhelmed in the early part of this century. Now, new pressures make resistance even more difficult. "For the Guarani, the core of resistance is religion. But today, there are many protestant churches which come to our communities with the same discourse as the Jesuits who came during the "discovery" of Brazil. They are killing our religion, killing our culture. Without a cultural identity, our people wander the highways and the streets of the cities, drinking, begging, and being ridiculed by the white society," stated Vitor. Twenty-one Guarani-Kaiowa communities have formed the assembly called ANTIGUASU to discuss these problems, especially that of land. Vitor explains, "If one community is already legalized, they help the other who are still in land conflicts." This organization will participate later this month in formation of a Statewide assembly to represent all Indigenous peoples of Mato Grosso do Sul, with the hope that the larger coalition will be able to more effectively pressure for land rights.

Positive Signs

In a landmark decision, the Supreme Federal Court in San Paulo recently dismissed a local court decision in favor of the ranching company Sattin S/A to relocate the Guarani community of Sete Cerros. Additionally, the Court granted a petition by the Nucleus for Indigenous Rights to prohibit one judge in Mato Grosso do Sul from hearing cases involving the Guarani, since every one of his decisions have favored ranching interests and resulted in evictions of thousands of Indians.

Vitor Guarani also notes "It seems that there will be hope for the Guarani if "Lula" is elected to the presidency, that there will be justice and recognition of Indian lands." Current opinion polls show Workers' Party candidate Luis Ignacio "Lula" da Silva with a strong national lead over his nearest

contender. At the end of last April, Lula met with Indigenous leaders representing 24 organizations and 36 Indian peoples from all over Brazil. At this meeting, he confirmed his opposition to anti-Indian constitutional "reforms", and promised that claims of Indigenous organizations would be met.

International Support Needed Now

Vitor Guarani stresses that international support for Jagaupire is needed now. "I am here to make this denunciation in the name of our people. I already made this denunciation in the US Congress, in the UN, and in the other spaces that are open to us. I hope that all of American society gives us support in this by sending letters to Judge Pedro Rotta in San Paulo, who is the judge who will decide, and by pressuring the Brazilian government so that they don't violate our constitutional rights. Between the 5 of October and last month they were to have demarcated all Indian lands, but this has not happened. ♣

In addition to Marta Vitor Guarani and Joao Ripper, information was provided by the Nucleus for Indigenous Rights, CIMI, and Rainforest Action Network.

Your letters are extremely important for the Guarani-Kaiowa. Please write judge Pedro Rotta asking that Guarani land rights be respected.

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