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Brazil: Guajajara Indians Take Nearly 400 Hostages To Defend Their Lands

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On Nov. 4, National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) sources reported that approximately 1,000 Guajajara indians took almost 400 persons hostage near Sao Pedro dos Cacetes, Maranhao state. The Guajajara demanded removal of the 2,400 residents of the town, illegally settled 50 years ago, which sits right in the middle of their 140,000 hectares Canabrava reserve. For years officials have vowed to remove the settlers but have repeatedly given in to protests by Sao Pedro dos Cacetes residents. In 1979, the federal government authorized funds to relocate the settlers but the plan was never implemented. A decade later the Maranhao state legislature legalized the town, although the decision was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court soon after. In recent years, settlers have continuously encroached on indian territory and claimed more and more of the Guajajara reserve, leading to a series of conflicts, with deaths on both sides. The conflict between the indians and the settlers escalated three days previous when hired assassins shot and killed the son of a Guajajara leader. In reprisal, indians killed a campesino the following day. The indians demanded punishment for the killers of the Guajajara leader's son. The hostages were passengers from vehicles travelling on a highway, blocked by the indians, through the Guajajara reserve. Federal Police quickly surrounded the area. Justice Minister Mauricio Correa said he supported the indians' demands, and reiterated that all the occupants of Sao Pedro dos Cacetes will have to leave the town. He then designated a commission to speed the move. On Nov. 5, FUNAI spokesperson Raimundo Franco told a Rio de Janeiro radio station that about 3,000 people from neighboring villages had taken up guns and were planning a mission to free the remaining hostages. About 300 of the hostages, mainly women and children, had previously been released. On Nov. 7, TV Globo reported that Correa proposed that all settlers, about 6,000 people, be evacuated from the Guajajara reserve in return for the release of the remaining 96 hostages. He also offered to send Federal Police troops to the reserve to enforce the removal of the settlers. On Nov. 9, following the escape of about 15 hostages, the Guajararas rejected the government proposal and demanded the presence of Correa in order to conduct direct negotiations. The hostages were released the following day after face-to-face negotiations between Correa and Maranhao Gov. Edson Lobao and Guajajara chiefs. The government agreed to a 30-day timetable for relocating the Sao Pedro dos Cacetes residents. The Guajararas nevertheless planned to continue to block the trans-Amazon highway and said they would keep the seven buses, five cars and three trucks seized until all settlers have been removed from the reserve. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 11/04/92; Associated Press, 11/07/92, 11/09/92; Agence France-Presse, 11/04-06/92, 11/08-10/92)

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