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José Pedro Martins

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Increasingly Critical Situation for Brazil's Indigenous Peoples

By José Pedro Martins

Brazil again made headlines in the international press during the entire month of January because of the controversy surrounding the Rio de Janeiro government's decision to raze the Aldeia Maracanã, a building that once housed the Museu do Índio. Indigenous families have lived in the building for years, and the Rio government called on the courts to evict them. Indigenous organizations and civil society throughout Brazil and other countries condemned the attitude of Rio de Janeiro Gov. Sérgio Cabral.

The still-unresolved episode is only one example of the tensions in many Brazilian indigenous communities. It is a perfect example of how the country, including the press, still does not understand the way of life, the thinking, and the culture of the first inhabitants of Brazil. And, since there is no understanding or deserved respect, the road remains open for a permanent state of violence against the indigenous and their customs, and especially their children, some of whom were among the victims of recent serious violent incidents.

Incident in Amazonas, threats of "mass suicide"

Three Indian children died in the state of Amazonas shortly after the first round of municipal elections in early October 2012. They were part of a group of nearly 2,000 Indians who had gone to the city of Atalaia do Norte to vote. Some media reports said the group had received money from politicians to finance the trip from the villages to the city. But those politicians were not elected, and the Indians did not get paid and were left stranded in the city without any money to return home. They were living in extremely precarious accommodations, and three children died while dozens of people had to be hospitalized. Later, the Indians returned to their villages, but with many health problems caused by the deplorable conditions they had to endure in Atalaia do Norte.

On the eve of the municipal runoff elections in late October 2012, the media and social networking sites reported that a group of Guarani-Kaiowá from Mato Grosso do Sul had threatened to carry out a "collective suicide" to protest their situation as victims, which has been made worse, historically, by the invasion of their homelands. Neglect, oblivion, and denial had supposedly led the Guarani-Kaiowá of Pyelito Kue in Mato Grosso do Sul to call for "collective suicide." However, at no time did leaders, in a communiqué to denounce the

situation of their people, speak of suicide, according to a communiqué from the Conselho Indigenista Missionário (CIMI), a Catholic Church agency.

CIMI said the Guarani-Kaiowá "talked about collective death [which is different from mass suicide] in the context of the struggle for land, saying that, if the courts and the ranchers' hired guns insist on driving them off their traditional lands, they are all willing to die there, they will never abandon their lands." The action is a combination of despair and love of the land.

Suicide a serious problem among indigenous

CIMI noted that suicides have occurred, including among the Guarani-Kaiowá, and not just a few. Between 2000 and 2011, 555 members of the group committed suicide because of the loss of their lands, their cultural references, their prospects for life. "None of the suicides were en masse, collective, or announced," said CIMI.

The Fundação Nacional de Saúde says that 221 children and young people (between 5 and 19 years of age) of that ethnic group were among the 410 indigenous suicides recorded between 2000 and 2008.

Most suicides are by hanging, as if to mirror the "tightening of the throat," "suffocated words," or "imprisoned soul" that they experienced in their lives. It is the act of jejuvy, a ritual death, a cultural gesture that was identified by the Jesuits at the time of the conquest, bringing agony mostly to young people. A disappointment, a scream, for the cutting off from tekoha, the ancestral burial ground where the Guarani-Kaiowá rest when their life is completed, where they "realize their way of being."

CIMI said that, since 1991, "only eight parcels of land were approved for this indigenous group who are the second-largest in the country, with 43,000 people living in a very small area."

The just over 40,000 Guarani-Kaiowá are all that is left of what was one of the largest indigenous groups in Brazil at the time of the colonial occupation. Some sources speak of 200,000 to 1 million Guarani who were enslaved at that time in their native territory, between the coast of São Paulo in southern Brazil and the southern part of Mato Grosso in the Paraná river basin. And that does not take into account the thousands who died. The indigenous of Pyelito Kue are survivors of that historic genocide.

The case of the Guarani-Kaiowá in Mato Grosso do Sul had enormous national and international repercussions. In the end, the group from Pyelito Kue could not be expelled, but the situation remains tense with the Guarani-Kaiowá and indigenous peoples in general.

In the state of Maranhão, the Terra Indígena (TI) Governador, a designated indigenous area in the municipality of Amarante, was again invaded by loggers on Jan. 20, when the federal police abandoned the area. The leaders from the Pukobjê-Gavião people expressed their concern about the situation.

Also worrisome is the situation of the indigenous people affected by the Belo Monte hydroelectric plant being built in the state of Pará. The plan to protect indigenous lands (TIs) affected by the dam in the municipality of Altamira has been delayed by more than two years.

"The Indians have not been listened to," said Dom Erwin Kräutler, bishop of Altamira. The bishop mentioned the violation of International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169, to which Brazil became a signatory in 2004. "Convention 169 requires that indigenous people have free, prior, and informed consultations, carried out in good faith, for any activities that affect their territorial rights and the continuation of their economic activities," said the bishop, who has long advocated for the rights of indigenous peoples.

Bishops in various parts of Brazil have taken a stand against the threats to indigenous peoples. "Various legislative proposals in Congress also aim to limit the rights of indigenous peoples," said the bishops of the Center-West Region of the Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB). The bishops said their main concern was with the proposed Constitutional Amendment 215, authored by Deputy Almir Moraes Sá, which changes the procedures for demarcating lands traditionally occupied by the Indians and for ratifying demarcations already approved. A climate of generalized tension regarding indigenous areas is causing indignation among the bishops, indigenous organizations, and others.