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Brazilian Officials Worry About Indigenous Peoples, Land Conflicts

by LADB Staff
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Various segments of the Brazilian government from the courts to the military to the executive have recently expressed concerns about the safety of indigenous people living in the Amazon and about potential violence involving their lands. The government of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has sought to expand Indian-reservation lands in the Amazon, signing a new decree in June designating 1.5 million hectares as a reserve.

Officials of the Supremo Tribunal Federal (STF) warned that land conflicts around the reserve areas could spiral out of control, and a top general criticized the government for giving too much land to Indian peoples.

Lula decrees Bau reservation in Para state

On June 20, Lula decreed a new 1.5 million hectare Indian reservation in the heart of the Amazon rain forest's logging frontier. The Bau reservation in Para state had been sought by the Caiapo (also spelled Kayapo) Indians as their ancestral territory since 1994. But resistance from settlers and loggers slowed its official creation. "We are advancing little by little, but we are making the necessary conquests," Lula said at the signing ceremony in the capital Brasilia.

In 2007, Lula designated a number of protected areas, totaling almost 100,000 sq km (10 million ha). The creation of those new reserves placed about 55% of Para state either under some form of government protection (see NotiSur, 2007-01-19) or on an Indian reservation, and the Bau reserve brings that more than a percentage point higher. Brazil's 1988 Constitution declared that all Indian ancestral lands be demarcated and turned over to tribes within five years.

While that process has not been completed, today about 11% of Brazilian territory and nearly 22% of the Amazon is in Indian hands. But pressure on the government has been increasing to limit the size of reserves as logging, ranching, and farming expand into the Amazon. Some settlers have violently resisted efforts to relocate them. Studies show that Indian reserves tend to be the best preserved areas of the rain forest because the tribes protect the borders.

National parks and ecological reserves rarely have enough staff to police their territory, so the vast regions that are preserved and protected in law are not preserved or protected in fact. Marcio Meira, president of the Fundacao Nacional do Indio (FUNAI), said at the ceremony that there are about 1 million Indians in Brazil about half of them on reservations.

Supreme Court, general warn about growing conflicts

In another reserve area deep in the northernmost reaches of the Amazon jungle, a land conflict between rice farmers and a handful of Indian tribes has turned so violent that the STF warns it could
escalate into civil war. The court is expected to decide sometime in August if the government can keep evicting rice farmers from a 1.7 million ha Indian reserve decreed by Lula in 2005.

The evictions were stopped in April when rice farmers started burning bridges and blockading roads, and justices said they feared a "veritable civil war." The court's decision could help determine the future of the Amazon, whose remaining jungles provide a critical cushion against global warming. It could also redefine Brazil's policy toward its Indians at a time of frequent confrontations, as the country spends billions of dollars opening roads, building dams, and promoting agribusiness across the world's largest remaining tropical wilderness.

Unlike in most other Latin American countries, where indigenous people are fighting for rights in mainstream society, most of Brazil's Indians continue to live in the jungle and maintain their languages and traditions. These Indians have fought for decades to keep or regain their ancestral lands. Earlier in the summer, government anthropologists released photos of one of the world's last uncontacted tribes fleeing logging near the Peruvian border.

In May, Indians protesting a proposed hydroelectric dam on the Xingu River in Para state used machetes to attack a government official who came to speak to the group. Top military generals claim that too much land in Indian hands, especially along Brazil's borders, threatens national security and could lead to tribes unilaterally declaring their lands independent nations. They compare the situation to Kosovo, which broke away from Serbia in February.

At a raucous seminar on national sovereignty at Rio de Janeiro's Military Club, the head of Army's Amazon command, Gen. Augusto Heleno Pereira, attacked the federal government's indigenous policy as "regretful and chaotic." He even suggested that the Army would refuse to remove the settlers. "The Brazilian Army does not serve the government but rather the Brazilian state," Pereira said.

Pereira's comments were characterized in the Brazilian media as possibly treasonous, and he was called in to discuss them with Defense Minister Nelson Jobim. Both the Army and the Defense Ministry later said the issue was resolved, without further comment. The conflict is clear in Roraima, a sparsely populated northeastern state that borders Guyana and Venezuela, where the government in 2005 officially recognized the Raposa Serra do Sol Indian Reservation after long delays.

The reservation was created to protect about 18,000 Indians from the Macuxi, Ingarico, Patamona, Wapixana, and Taupeng tribes who live in the area. Some 3,500 people gathered to celebrate the new reservation three years ago and were briefly stranded in the jungle when vandals set fire to a bridge. The violence has continued with each attempt to remove settlers. "The question here is much bigger than the state of Roraima. It's a question of national integration," said rice farmer Paulo Cesar Quartiero, who has been jailed twice for resisting eviction once for blocking a federal highway and again on weapons charges after his ranch hands shot and wounded 10 Indians.

Roraima state Gov. Jose de Ancieta has sued to stop the evictions, arguing that the reservation is strangling economic development in a state where 46% of the land is already in Indian hands. And many Brazilians including some military leaders are beginning to criticize the government's
indigenous policy as isolationist and even a threat to national sovereignty. But Paulo Santilli of FUNAI says a court ruling in favor of the rice farmers would spell havoc in the Amazon, "not just on the part of Indians, but from land grabbers, prospectors, and loggers who would take it as a signal that reservations could be invaded."

Indians and their allies fear such a ruling would also allow judges to reduce the size of other already established reservations. "If they decide against us, it would be the worst thing that could happen to indigenous people across Brazil," said Macuxi chief Pedro Raposa da Silva. He added that angry Indians could carry out the evictions themselves if the court decided against them. Officially, the government sides with the Indians. "Those people [the settlers] think their contribution to the economy, and their control of the local institutions, make them right," said Justice Minister Tarso Genro, who also oversees indigenous affairs. "They are mistaken."

But some STF justices indicated they do not agree. "If we take the concept of prior occupation too far," said STF Justice Marco Aurelio Mello, "we will have to hand my marvelous city of Rio de Janeiro over to the Indians." The Comissao Pastoral da Terra (CPT) a human rights organization that is a part of the Conferencia Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB) reported that the number of murders in the rural regions of the country had declined in 2007, although many other sources of conflict in the countryside had worsened.

The CPT said the number of families expelled from the land had more than doubled since 2006, the number of people facing death threats increased by 25%, and conflicts about land had increased by 93%. Army plans new Amazon posts In previous years of the Lula administration, soldiers have been deployed to the Amazon in an effort to reduce violence, particularly after the murder of US-born nun Dorothy Stang made international headlines (see NotiSur, 2005-02-25).

On Aug. 11, the Ministry of Defense announced that it was readying a new military plan of action in the border region of the Amazon. The plan envisages creating armed forces posts in those Amazon regions that border other countries such as Colombia and Peru, including indigenous reserves. Jobim said the military posts could begin to be deployed as early as this year. Jobim said the main difficulty of the Brazilian Army is the lack of infrastructure. He said more investment in the armed forces is necessary, mainly in the protection of the Amazon. "We have the best soldiers in the jungle and what we need now is to improve the conditions of our equipment," he said.

The minister said that indigenous communities, which inhabit much of the border regions of the Amazon, will have to adapt to the presence of new posts in places. "The government decided that the Army will install posts at the borders. The communities may protest if they wish, but we will install ourselves," he said. During an Aug. 11 visit to the region, Gen. Pereira said, "The biggest security problem in the Amazon is the lack of state presence." He said that "illicit" groups carrying out "drug trafficking, arms trafficking, biopiracy, illegal logging, and illegal mining" could breach Brazil's borders.

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