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Brazil: Safety and survival of indigenous peoples at risk

"In the Guarani and Kaiowá areas what happens? A lot of malnutrition. We have no land to plant on. Precisely because of this, there is misery and hunger in our land... We Indians have already taken a decision. If an eviction occurs in these areas in conflict, we will commit suicide. We will commit suicide because we don't mean anything to anyone,"

Indigenous leader in a public meeting with a special senate commission on Indigenous affairs, February 2004.

As long as the needs of Indigenous peoples are low on the list of governmental priorities, violence and chronic poverty will continue to threaten their very existence, said Amnesty International today as it launched a report on the issue of Indigenous peoples in Brazil.

The report highlights that, while there have been some advances in respect for their rights over the years, Indians across the country continue to suffer discrimination and violent attacks, often as a result of their struggle for ancestral land.

On 13 January 2003, 72-year-old Marcos Verón, a leader of the Guarani Kaiowá people in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul was beaten to death in front of members of his family during an attempt to remove him from ancestral land.

Several men were arrested and charged with a variety of crimes including murder, attempted murder, kidnapping and torture. The cases are expected to come before the courts later this year.

"The continuous failure of Brazilian governments to act effectively to protect indigenous communities has exposed them to human rights violations and has laid the foundations for the violence of the present," said Amnesty International.

Amnesty International's report exposes how the failure of federal authorities to guarantee the right of indigenous people to their land, through demarcation and ratification of many indigenous territories, and the very slow process by which this is achieved when it does take place, has contributed to attacks on Indians.

On 31 March, an injunction granted by the government, by which land was allocated to the Guarani-Kaiowá indigenous community living in Cerro Marangatu, southwest Brazil, will expire. If the authorities fail to stop their eviction; the community, who have planted the land with crops essential to their survival, will be

left destitute.

"The Brazilian authorities have repeatedly failed to intervene to prevent loss of life. Even when there have been repeated warnings that serious violence is likely to occur in the context of indigenous land disputes or invasions, as in the case of the Xukuru in the State of Pernambuco, or the Cinta Larga in the state of Rondônia, no action has been taken."

Indigenous communities across the country are suffering the consequences of severe economic and social deprivation.

"Land is key to the development of indigenous communities, by failing to protect this very basic right, the Brazilian authorities are placing their safety and their very survival at risk."

"By ignoring their responsibility to devise and implement a clear indigenous policy, the current administration is repeating and exacerbating the mistakes and omissions of past governments. It has failed to fulfil its constitutional and international obligations, as well as the very high expectations created by its own recent electoral commitments."

Amnesty International urges the Brazilian authorities to:

Set out clear policies and specific strategies for tackling the persistent human rights issues that affect Brazil's indigenous population;

Fulfil its international and constitutional obligations by resolving all outstanding indigenous land claims;

Investigate all cases of violent attacks and other human rights abuses against members of indigenous and bring those responsible to justice.

"Without a strong strategic commitment by the authorities to guaranteeing Indian safety, resolving land disputes and ratifying outstanding claims to land, further violence and steps backward appear inevitable."

Public Document

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