

The Indigenous Peoples of Brazil: Lands and Life under Threat

"Land is sacred for us Kaiowá. Land is the essence of Kaiowá life for us. Land is the structure of life for us Guarani indigenous people"

Letter from a Guarani-Kaiowá leader to Survival International

On 16 December 2005, an Indigenous Guarani-Kaiowá community in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul was violently evicted from their ancestral land by federal police acting with unofficial support from local landowners. The Guarani-Kaiowá were forced to set up camp along a nearby highway, with insufficient food, sanitation and shelter.

On 24 December 2005, nine days after the eviction, thirty-nine-year-old Dorvalino Rocha was shot in the chest at the entrance to a farm on the disputed territory. According to reports, he was killed by a private security guard hired by local landowners.

Dorvalino Rocha was the 38th Indigenous person killed in 2005 – the worst year for over a decade, according to the Brazilian NGO, the Indigenous Missionary Council. Twenty-eight of these killings took place in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul alone.

The uprooting of the Guarani-Kaiowá community followed a Supreme Court ruling that effectively suspended the Guarani-Kaiowá's constitutional right to their land.

The situation has resulted from the failure of Brazilian courts and the state to systematically uphold the rights of Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples are forced to squat on the margins of their ancestral lands, in constant fear of reprisal from gunmen hired by landowners or poorly monitored security firms.

Background

Land is central to the Indigenous peoples of Brazil and to fulfilment of their basic rights in relation to identity, culture, food, and health. For hundreds of years, Indigenous peoples in Brazil have been violently driven off their land by those seeking to claim its wealth for themselves. Today, this violence continues with the involvement of many competing interests that include businesses, prospectors, cattle ranchers, logging companies and the military. Such vested interests often have substantial economic and political influence which they can use to delay and interrupt resolution of land disputes.

The Guarani-Kaiowá, one of the most populous Indigenous peoples in Brazil, live in some of the smallest and most impoverished territories: rural pockets of poverty surrounded by large soya and sugar cane plantations as well as overcrowded urban reserves where life is plagued by malnutrition, ill-health, squalid living conditions. Infant mortality in Guarani-Kaiowá communities has surged in recent years, reportedly largely due to hunger and malnutrition, with 64 recorded deaths for every 1000 children in 2004, more than double Brazil's national average. A federal deputy described the infant mortality rate as a "*real genocide of indigenous people in Mato Grosso do Sul.*"¹

¹ Diário MS, 27 January 2005

International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples 2006

The right of Indigenous peoples to their land is enshrined in the 1988 constitution. With the adoption of the Constitution, the government committed itself to the recognition and protection of the land titles of Indigenous peoples in Brazil by 1993. More than a decade later, more than 100 officially recognised Indigenous territories in Brazil are still awaiting identification, which is only the first stage in the process of recognizing and protecting their land rights.

In 2004, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination urged the Brazilian government complete the demarcation of all Indigenous lands, expressing its concern that possession and use of Indigenous land by Indigenous peoples was threatened and restricted by recurring acts of aggression against them.

In every region of the world, Indigenous peoples face deeply entrenched racism and discriminatory laws and policies. Denied adequate protection of their right to live on and use the lands and territories vital to their cultural identity and their daily survival, Indigenous communities are often driven into extreme poverty and ill-health. Amnesty International is working alongside Indigenous peoples' movements from around the globe to help advance effective international human rights standards to address their specific needs and circumstances. This includes calling for the immediate adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples when it comes before the General Assembly this year.

TAKE ACTION:

Please send letters to the Brazilian Minister of Justice and the Governor of Mato Grosso do Sul:

- Note with concern the escalating violence against Indigenous individuals in Brazil
- Call for all those involved in the killing of Dorvalino Rocha to be brought to justice;
- Ask the authorities to set out clear policies and specific strategies for protecting the human rights of the Guarani-Kaiowá, including their right to land.

WRITE TO:

*Exmo. Ministro da Justiça da República
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