THE LAST STAND OF MARCELO DOS SANTOS

He is battling to save a people from extinction. Is he following in the fated footsteps of Chico Mendes?

BY JANE KAY
On this hot day in the dusty Brazilian logging town of Comodoro, three angry farmers are shaking their fists in the window of Marcelo dos Santos' Toyota truck.

"Marcelo, Marcelo. We want our guns and our food back," the leader, his face tense and menacing, tells dos Santos. "You tell the Indians we need our guns. They robbed us."

The 39-year-old Indian agent has witnessed death threats and angry mobs. Men have told his wife and children, "Tell your friend we're going to kill him." It is broad daylight in the center of town, and he shows no fear. There will be no violence — today.

But dos Santos lives with the knowledge that violence could strike him down at any time. Almost singlehandedly, on this lawless, desperately poor frontier, he is fighting to protect an Indian tribe, the Nambikwara, from destruction at the hands of powerful enemies: politicians, ranchers, farmers, gold miners and lumber poachers.

Dos Santos has dedicated his life to these primitive people who face extinction in the depths of the Amazon. Whether confronting armed trespassers, bringing food to sick children, or lobbying the World Bank and the Brazilian government, he spends his days protecting the forest people from those who would pillage their lands, poison their water and bring them disease.

It is a dangerous mission. Dos Santos' enemies are numerous. And they have demonstrated that they do not hesitate to kill.

On July 22, 1988, a wealthy rancher and his son walked into the home of Chico Mendes, the leader of Brazil's Rural Worker's Union, and shot him to death. The two were widely believed to be acting for more powerful interests who were never convicted. The state's commitment to pursuing the case came under further suspicion when the killers "escaped" from a notoriously lax provincial prison after serving a year.

Brazilians are calling dos Santos the new Chico Mendes. For 17 years, here on the malaria belt along Highway BR364 between Cuiaba and Porto Velho, he has displayed the same dedication to fighting for an exploited group that Mendes did in daring to stand up for the poor, landless rubber tappers of the Amazon. And many fear he will meet the same fate.

The three men confronting dos Santos are farmers who have migrated to this Wild West corner of Brazil's huge Grosso state to get title to land. For favors and money, they admitted tree thieves through their settlement, Gleba Mazzutti, onto the Nambikwara reserve. In return, the Nambikwara stole their guns, blankets and food supplies.

The wood thieves, two powerful businessmen well-known in Comodoro, bulldoze roads into the Nambikwara's rainforests and steal the rare, valuable mahogany trees that grow there. Since 1980, poachers have cut down about 5,000 trees — close to half the stock remaining on the Nambikwara land.

With the help of his Nambikwara friends, dos Santos has arrested some of these illegal woodcutters and confiscated bulldozers and gold-dredging equipment used to rape the Indians' vast, unprotected land. Last year, he and Nambikwara tribesmen gashed 32 illegally felled mahogany trees to make them worthless.

"The loggers get furious when they come back," a friend of dos Santos says. "It's like Zorro. It's becoming Marcelo's trademark."

All of which explains why dos Santos' mere presence in this logging town, where he stopped to drop off a friend at the bus station, is enough to precipitate a confrontation.

After spitting out a few more angry sentences, the farmers' leader, who is also the president of the Association of Posseiros, landless people who've migrated here to get title to land, finally begins to calm down. He tells dos Santos:

"We want peace. We want to compromise. We promise not to let the woodcutters come in if the Indians stop invading and stealing everything. You tell them for us."

Dos Santos, in his familiar jeans, sandals and maroon T-shirt, sighs and tries to explain to the farmers that peace may only be possible in another generation. "Another generation is another reality," he says. "But now it's very difficult, because the madeireiros (mahogany cutters) continue to steal the trees and the fazendeiros (ranchers) to steal the land. You must be patient with the Indian."

But in a month's time, the Indians, furious because time after time the arrested woodcutters were released by the police, captured a thief, took him to their village, beat him and kept him prisoner for three days.

As the conflict escalates, it seems only a matter of time until the situation explodes. With each day, the danger increases for dos Santos — and his friends in Brazil and around the world grow more fearful.

In Washington, Stephen Schwartzman, an anthropologist who works for the Environmental Defense Fund, says to a reporter: "Go talk to Marcelo dos Santos before he gets killed."

The Nambikwara are among the most primitive people in South America. Numbering about 1,050, they live in tiny villages spread over western Mato Grosso and southern Rondônia — Férineus de Souza, Nambikwara Reserve, Tiresatinga, Guaçore Valley and Sararé. They speak their own languages, hunt wild animals and grow food in seasonal gardens. They pierce their upper lips and nasal septum with wood shafts, or coat their faces with red pigment. Their skin is often gray from the ashes of the fires next to which they sleep. Most wear no clothes.

Of its population of 150 million, Brazil has 250,000 Indians — 200 groups — of which two-thirds live in the Amazon. The Amazon
Basin contains the planet’s largest tropical forest — a vast storehouse of rainwater that creates rivers like the Amazon, and the birthplace of billions of biologically diverse species nurtured by moisture and nutrients. For the Nambikwara, and other native peoples, the Amazon has provided food, shelter and spiritual guidance for 20 millennia.

Proud of what they know and not what they have, the Nambikwara remain fiercely true to their ancient practices. Cornell anthropologist David Price, who has studied the tribe for more than 25 years, says “Unless they become physically extinct, they’re unlikely to throw off their culture and become Brazilians. They’re very proud of their tribe. The missionaries used to call them ‘a missionary-breaker tribe.’ They’d say, ‘I’m a Christian. Baptize me.’ Then the missionaries would find out later they’d continue their own way of being.”

For a century, whites have been fascinated with the Nambikwara. In 1938, one of the 20th century’s most famous anthropologists, Claude Levi-Strauss, spent six weeks with them. In his classic work Tristes Tropiques, he described their cooperative, peaceful lives. But he also wrote that a visitor who camps in the bush with the Indians for the first time “cannot help but feel anguish and pity before the spectacle of a people so poorly equipped — crushed down, it would seem, against a hostile earth by some implacable cataclysm, naked and shivering beside their guttering fires.”

It’s true that the Nambikwara have very few possessions. While whites have hammocks, mosquito repellent, tents and flashlights, they have nothing. Yet if it rains, in 10 minutes they can make a shelter. And their knowledge of their world goes far deeper: According to Price, it takes years of close study to understand the subtle ways in which they have mastered the complex ecosystems of Amazonian rainforests and savannahs. “Outsiders see them sleeping in ashes and sand by the fire. They don’t see their knowl-

dge,” he says. “You don’t know their literature unless you speak Nambikwara. They have magnificent poetry, little gems of poetry, magnificent music, which the missionaries call chanting because the Nambikwara have a five-tone scale. They are virtuosic in their ability to compose and sing.

“They know where to find animals. They have a magnificent knowledge of ecological relationships, something that doesn’t appear to the outside. If they see a certain bird, for example, they know they’ll find a tapir.”

But the rich knowledge the Nambikwara have passed on for thousands of years may not survive the next century. The Nambikwara, like the rest of Brazil’s Indian tribes, are facing extinction.

Between 1900 and 1960, Brazil’s indigenous population fell from 1 million to less than 200,000, as farming, ranching, rubber and nut collecting and mining expansion in age-old Indian land brought an end to 80 tribes. Through disease and contamination, says Brazilian anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, they were “deculturated and destroyed.”

Development has brought better lives for many Brazilians, but it has decimated the Indians. For the Nambikwara, and many other Amazonian tribes, the single most damaging event took place in 1960: the construction of the infamous highway BR364, which runs from Cuiba to Porto Velho, on Brazil’s remote western frontier. The Nambikwara were forcibly uprooted and relocated in the unproductive uplands: They came walking back to the rainforests, emaciated, starving, begging for food, so pitiable they were called “the Biafran Brazilians.” Hundreds starved and died of measles. The tribe’s population, which once stood at over 5,000, dropped to 500.

The Nambikwara survived, but in 1980, they found themselves overrun. Assisted by a World Bank loan, Brazil paved and rerouted the road, speeding up outsider settlement. “Everytime fell in on them,” says Price, author of Before the Bulldozer, which recounts the World Bank’s culpability in the Nambikwara’s demise. “The road means they’re being exposed to infectious diseases which weren’t part of their lives before. It means they’ve been exploited for their labor and resources.

“Most importantly, they’ve lost control of their own land and destiny. They’re something like prisoners of war, in a war they’ve never really fought. To make it worse, they feel inferior because Western society says, look at what we can make — aluminum pots, steel axes. Ultimately, they’re made to feel like second-class citizens. They’ve lost the ability to choose how they want to lead their lives.”

In the 1990s, things have gotten even worse for the tribe. In northwest Brazil, beset by poverty, malnutrition, corruption and disease, where precious resources are the only riches, the poor often fight the poor. Mahogany tree thieves and gold miners have brought more disease and environmental devastation.

In 1990, some 5,000 illegal gold miners, or garimpeiros, most of them desperately poor, swarmed over the Sararé area, the southern Nambikwara land, when gold was discovered. For months, the Brazilian Indian agency, FUNAI, pleaded with them to leave, arrested some, obtained court orders — all without success. Only last summer, under pressure from the World Bank, did Mato Grosso Gov. Jaime Campos evict them. Before they left, however, the miners despoiled the Indians’ fishing river, which is also one of their sources of clean drinking water. Ruined by dredging equipment, the Agua Suja River, once 8 feet wide, now has no banks at all. It’s flat, muddy and full of toxic mercury.

And the miners brought something even worse — malaria and flu. As in Tierra del Fuego, the Aleutians Islands and the United States, where whole native populations were wiped out by contact with whites, young and weak Indians with no resistance to outsiders’ diseases are dying.
The miners are gone for now, but 2,000 of them are massed near the Nambikwara’s lands. If the tribe’s defenders relax their vigilance, they will return.

Almost alone, confronting these desperate men and the powerful interests that often lie behind them, with no monetary support from his cash-poor Indian agency, stands Marcelo dos Santos. Like Chico Mendes, the blue-eyed, sandy-bearded dos Santos is a natural leader whose gentle demeanor masks tenacity and unshakeable resolve. Like Mendes, he has little money or worldly possessions. He does have an adoring family and a core of committed friends in Vilhena, Cuiabá, Brasilia and Rio who are ready to scramble for medical supplies, a jeep or letters to the World Bank.

Like the martyred leader, dos Santos is modest, quick to laugh and tell stories. Yet he also has a profound sense of the danger that he and the people whom he loves face daily. When alone, his face sets in lines revealing the weight of the life-and-death responsibility that he feels.

Dos Santos lives in three worlds: that of a FUNAI agent, fighting the grinding day-to-day battle to stop mahogany thieves and gold miners and provide food and medical care for the Indians; that of an advocate and lobbyist, calling and writing politicians, judges, federal police and the World Bank, trying to win justice for the Indians who have no voice in the white-dominated world of international commerce and courts; and that of a member of the Nambikwara family, living their life in the heart of the Amazon jungle.

The most immediately rewarding, but frustrating, of dos Santos’ worlds is the official world of an Indian agent. FUNAI, the National Indian Foundation, is probably at the most progressive stage in its long history of corruption and mismanagement. But it’s so underfunded that there’s no money to pay the telephone bill, fix six broken vehicles or buy medicine for the Nambikwara.

Dos Santos’ two major tasks as a FUNAI agent are trying to stop the rape of the Nambikwara’s mahogany trees and keeping the gold miners out. Most of the mahogany left in Brazil is on their land and that of other indigenous groups. Although the rich forests and minerals technically belong to the Brazilian government, they may be used by indigenous peoples on their traditional lands. It’s illegal for anyone else to use the resources.

The Nambikwara depend on the forest to live. With the exception of a few trees that they cut for houses, furniture, and tools, they leave the mahogany trees untouched. “The Nambikwara know very well if they cut the forests, there’ll be no animals to hunt,” says Juliana Santilli, a lawyer with a public-interest law center that sued two Mato Grosso wood bosses for compensation after 500 mahogany trees were cut on Nambikwara land. “They don’t see the forest as having a commercial value. It’s nothing they can exchange for something else.”

But the woodcutters are desperate for the red gold. When some of them were arrested by dos Santos earlier this year, they gave a statement to the police that they didn’t know they were on the Indian land. (When they saw the Nambikwara, they paid them off in packets of sugar, which they said the Indians crave.) They were promptly released.

Like the woodcutters, the gold miners scoff at the understaffed agency’s attempts to keep them off Nambikwara land. “The problems don’t stop,” dos Santos says in his rudimentary English. “Every week FUNAI removes 10 to 12 garimpeiros. But FUNAI doesn’t have funds or cars. There are only two men in FUNAI to oversee the policy — and they both have malaria.”
Last year, when the malaria hit the Nambikwara lands, the hospital had no money for beds, for medicine, for food. He and some compañeros had to go hunting to feed the sick.

Dos Santos’ second world, as a bush politician, pays slower but bigger dividends. For decades in the Amazon, the large landowners and the political leaders who represent them have fueled feuds between impoverished groups and Indians, paid off police or looked the other way, meanwhile making money off exploited resources or, in more recent years, massive development schemes financed by multinational lending institutions.

Dos Santos is out to change all that. His voice is being heard by the World Bank, the governors of Mato Grosso and Rondonia, Brazil’s new President Itamar Franco, Brazilian diplomats and international human rights and conservation organizations.

In past years, he has denounced the forced relocation of the Indians from their Guaporé Valley homeland to higher, poorer lands, the use of a harmful defoliating herbicide and a proposed hydroelectric dam project within the reserve. At his suggestion, last April a dozen Brazilian indigenous advocacy groups successfully pleaded with the World Bank to delay a $205 million loan to the state of Mato Grosso until the gold miners were removed.

They are impressive achievements — but they carry a price tag. For over a decade, dos Santos has been a marked man.

A Nambikwara nurse, Mariana de Jesus, was told in confidence by a logging truck driver giving her a ride that the woodcutters had a meeting and decided to kill dos Santos. Last summer, his daughter’s teacher rushed over in terror to tell dos Santos and his wife Gigi, who’s part Indian, that while passing the local bar she heard some men talking about how they were planning to kill him. Gigi now worries whenever he leaves the house.

The hate level, already high, ratcheted up this year when the Nucleus for Indigenous Rights, a public-interest law center in Brasilia, took two Mato Grosso wood bosses to court at dos Santos’ behest, asking for compensation for more than 500 stolen mahogany trees and payment for reforestation. A powerful Sao Paulo landowner who runs 8,000 cattle on Nambikwara land also was sued.

“I’m very afraid for Marcelo,” says Juliana Santilli, the attorney who filed the lawsuits from her office in Brasilia. “They know (he) brought us the case. His life is at big risk. It’s a miracle that he hasn’t been killed yet. The kind of work he does attracts all kinds of pressure.

“There are the wood loggers who want to take all the wood they can. They’ve tried to corrupt Marcelo several times. They can’t accept the fact that he won’t sell the Nambikwara wood for all the money in the world.

“I was horrified when I was there,” she continues. “Marcelo fights alone. Marcelo creates a big problem for them all. The federal police don’t give a damn. He catches the loggers. He takes their equipment. But he can’t keep it because the federal police won’t file charges. IBAMA (Brazil’s national environmental agency) is in charge of protecting the environment and won’t do anything.”

For dos Santos’ friends, the strain of knowing the danger he faces becomes intolerable at times. Anthropologist Neila Soares, who belongs to a Brazilian human rights group, the Commission of Support to the Nambikwara — called Awaru because it sounds like the Nambikwara word for “friend” — says, “We love him. Marcelo is like a brother of mine. We fight, we argue, but we are always together.” Soares tries to reassure herself that dos Santos’ strong FUNAI connections will protect him: “This is not a good political time to kill a leader who works with indigenous people. We’re living in a democracy that we’ve never had before. Things are changing here.”

But she can’t shut out the terrible thoughts. “Sometimes I don’t sleep thinking of the possibility that Marcelo could be killed,” she says. “It may happen tomorrow, it may be happening now.”

In an attempt to protect him, the Nucleus for Indigenous Rights sent an SOS out to international human rights groups asking for letters to Brazil’s Minister of Justice warning that dos Santos “is risking his own life and the lives of his family” in the defense of the Nambikwara. “In his struggle to protect indigenous lands against the onslaught of loggers, ranchers, gold miners and land swindlers, Marcelo receives frequent death threats — directed at him, his relatives and friends,” it said.

Dos Santos’ fellow activists see an ominous portent in the “escape” of Darly and Darci Alves da Silva, the men who murdered Chico Mendes. Anthropologist Schwartzman, who worked with Mendes in the Amazon, fears that the risk for dos Santos and activists all over Brazil is greater today than ever before. “If Chico Mendes’ assassins cannot be kept in prison,” he says, “no criminal in Brazil need fear the law — unless his victim is rich and famous.”

The third world Marcelo dos Santos inhabits is the rainforest of his friends, the Nambikwara.

Since 1976, when he dropped out of anthropology studies at the University of Sao Paulo and took a job at FUNAI, dos Santos has not only fought for the Nambikwara — he has lived with them. In fact, he may be the only outsider who really knows them. “I like them,” he says simply. “I live with them for 17 years. It’s a long time — it’s a lifetime.”

The Nambikwara have embraced the gentle, bearded white man. Dos Santos speaks their language. He takes part in their ceremonies, shares their dreams, their fears and joys, their secrets, their lives. As for dos Santos, he considers himself a Nambikwara. He says he has two families — his biological family and his Nambikwara family. “I have another brother, another father, Gorducho, another mother, Baixinha,” he says. “When I stay away for a long time, maybe seven or eight days, I’m longing for them. I miss them.

“My (three) children are born there on Nambikwara land, and (Continued on page 30)
Thompson and Branagh, center, with (from left) Michael Keaton, Robert Sean Leonard, Kate Beckinsale, Keana Reeves and Denzel Washington in "M".