Despairing Brazilian Indians turn to suicide

With reservations too small for farming, natives have nowhere to go, no hope

By JAMES BROOKE
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DOURADOS, Brazil — There is an underside to the prosperity in this area of Brazil's agricultural frontier, a landscape of grain silos, sleek white cattle and a sea of soybeans extending west to the horizon.

In despair over the collective loss of Brazil's west, this municipality's original inhabitants are quietly killing themselves. Last year, in a reservation of 7,200 Indians, there were 29 suicides, and eight more were reported by mid-May of this year.

"1990 was the year it exploded," said Maria Aparecida da Costa Pereira, a psychologist sent here by the National Indian Foundation, a government agency known as Funai. "They are sending out an appeal. The suicides speak of a lack of prospects, of a lack of a future."

The Americas are littered with unsuccessful attempts at reconciling Indian and European cultures, but the Dourados reservation is an especially stark example as the hemisphere prepares for observations next year of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus.

Not enough land for farming

In an attempt to speed the Kaiowa Indians' assimilation of European ways, the Dourados reserve was established here in the 1920s alongside one of the few white outposts in a wilderness territory called Mato Grosso, or Big Forest.

"When I came here, Dourados had six inhabitants," recalled Irenio Isnard, a wizened Kaiowa man of 91 years.

Today, Dourados is an agro-business center of 150,000 people. But over the years, the adjacent 8,819-acre reservation has become a dumping ground for ranchers who wanted to rid their lands of migratory bands of Kaiowa, a subgroup of the Guarani, an ethnic group once found across southern Brazil and Paraguay.

Today, the Dourados reserve holds almost one Indian per acre — not enough land for traditional subsistence farming. To survive, Indian men work as migrant laborers, leaving the reservation for months to cut sugarcane for alcohol distilleries situated several hours by truck from here.

Indian women walk to town to sell Indian trinkets, to beg or to engage in prostitution. Until it was closed recently, a town dump was on the edge of the reserve, providing limited material for scavengers.

Evangelical churches move in

"I once saw 30 to 40 Indians fighting over clothes and toys in the dump," Joel Vitorino da Silva, a former Indian protection agent, said as he drove a car down the red dirt roads of the reserve.

Neighboring white farmers started to rent Indian land, and traders brought in alcohol from the adjacent town. The last traditional shaman died a decade ago, and evangelical churches aggressively moved into the reserve, preaching against the Indians' ancestral beliefs.

An Adventist mission had been on the reserve since the 1940s, maintaining the Kaiowas' only hospital. But five new churches have opened recently, limiting their social action to collecting monthly tithes.

"Historically, in situations of pressure, the Guarani withdraw," said Pereira, the psychologist. "Under pressure, the Guarani resort to migration, prayer or death."

With the big forest now a big farm, there is nowhere to go.

In Mato Grosso do Sul state, the Kaiowa and other Guarani subgroups have been concentrated in 11 reserves, totaling 52,000 acres. The Missionary Indigenous Council, a Roman Catholic group, seeks legalization of 10 more reserves, which would almost double recognized Indian land.

But previous attempts at protecting the Indians have been slapped down by hostile local judges or by violence from ranchers.

Appeal to pope, later death

In one appeal that caught the eyes of the world, a Kaiowa leader from Dourados, Marcal de Souza, addressed Pope John Paul II during the pope's visit to Brazil in 1980.

"When Brazil was discovered, we were a great nation," de Souza said of Brazil's Indian population, which has dwindled from an estimated 6 million 500 years ago to 230,000 today.

"Today, we inhabit the margins of this country with no way to live. Even our survival is in danger as we are being murdered on this land."

Turning to the stocky Indian leader, the pope replied: "With all my heart, I hope that you, as the first inhabitants of this land, will obtain the right to live in peace and tranquillity. May you not suffer the true nightmare of being removed for the benefit of others."

Three years later, de Souza was slain. Although evidence appeared to point to a local rancher, Libero Monteiro de Lima, the case has never gone to trial. Moving faster, however, a state judge recently upheld de Lima's claim to 5,700 acres of land now occupied by 200 Indians. Funai, the Indian protection service, is appealing the decision.

Feeling corralled on all fronts, the Kaiowa here started to turn to suicide.

"For the Guarani, death is not the end," said Olivio Mangolim, regional coordinator of the Missionary Council. "It is a way to get to a better situation without suffering."