

# Povos Indígenas no Brasil

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SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE, JOAO RIPPER/IMAGENS DA TERRA

A Guaraní-Kaiowa family stand with their belongings on the devastated land that was theirs.

## 'Without land, we begin to die'

MARK ABLEY  
and ALEXANDER MORRIS  
THE GAZETTE

**A**BOUT 220 Guaraní-Kaiowa Indians are threatening to commit collective suicide in southwestern Brazil. The Indians' supporters say they will carry out their threat if they are forced off a remnant of their traditional land.

"The situation is very tense," said José Roberto Borges of the Rainforest Action Network in San Francisco, a group campaigning on behalf of the Indians. "They are up in arms, literally: arrows and bows."

The 220 Guaraní-Kaiowa are now restricted to a 2,350-hectare patch of land in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, not far from the border with Paraguay. Their home area of Jaguapiré, near the town of Tacuru, has become a small island of farmland and forest in the midst of sugarcane plantations and cattle ranches.

"Without land," a Kaiowa chief called Zeferino has said, "the Indian loses his language and loses the memory of his people. Without land, the Indian cannot plant. Without land, the Indian has nowhere to hunt and fish, nowhere to look for herbs, nowhere to perform his religion. He is lost. He begins to die."

The Guaraní-Kaiowa had little or no contact with non-Indian society until the early years of this century. They fished and hunted across fertile, game-filled plains.

Now everything has changed. Most of the wildlife has disappeared from the area. And from all accounts, the Kaiowa are in a desperate condition. Many of them sleep in makeshift tents and scrape a meagre living by working on big sugarcane plantations.

Lidia Luz, an anthropologist in São Paulo who works with Brazil's Indians, said that "the Kaiowa's intention to commit suicide is genuine. They are prepared to do this because they understand they can no longer survive if there is no land for them."

The Kaiowa comprise one of the most important groups among the 55,000 or so Guaraní in Brazil (others are found in Argentina and Paraguay, where Guaraní is a national language). They are cut off from the vast majority of Brazil's Indians, who inhabit lands in the Amazon watershed far to the north.

About 30,000 Guaraní live in Mato Grosso do Sul. According to Brazilian journalist João Ripper, 8,000 of them are threatened with expulsion from their homes because of conflict with agricultural landowners.

It's a conflict they generally lose. And over the last decade, the Guaraní have been turning more



An ancient Guaraní-Kaiowa woman.

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and more to suicide. Official figures from FUNAI (the Brazilian government agency for Indian affairs) show that 117 Guaraní killed themselves between 1986 and 1993 - most of them young people who died by hanging.

FUNAI says that 88 of the suicides came from the ranks of the Kaiowa; Kaiowa leaders give an even higher figure. In any case, yet more suicides took place during the first weeks of this year.

"I will die here," Ripper was told by a 92-year-old Kaiowa woman called Jaguapoty. "I buried my father and my grandfather here. If they come to throw me out, I will kill myself. My husband will kill himself and all our children too."

At an official level, Brazil has not been indifferent to the plight of the Guaraní. In 1992, the minister of justice declared Jaguapiré an area of permanent possession by the Guaraní-Kaiowa - a decision confirmed by Brazil's president at the time, Fernando Collor. One of the big landowners in the Jaguapiré region reportedly called the decision "an assault against private property."

Last week, however, it was revealed that Brazilian politicians have been withholding millions of dollars in international aid that had been earmarked for the country's Indians.

But Mato Grosso do Sul is far removed from paper orders issued in the capital. Ripper observes that four-fifths of the state's land is owned by less than 1 per cent of the population. And two local ranchers, convinced the land is rightfully theirs, are determined to evict the Indians in Jaguapiré and to clear-cut the remaining forest. (In Brazil, unlike most of North America, the boundaries of Indian reserves are

often bitterly contested.)

José Fuentes Romero, a major landowner in the area, has claimed legal title to about 1,300 hectares of the reserve, including the village of Jaguapiré. Otavio Junqueira de Moraes has asserted that he owns a further 700 hectares. If the courts confirm their claim to ownership, the Kaiowa would be left huddling on less than 400 hectares of land.

It's a pattern familiar elsewhere in Mato Grosso do Sul. Because of incursions by landowners throughout the state, the amount of land occupied by Indians is thought to have shrunk to less than 25,000 hectares - a mere half of the territory occupied just a decade ago.

In a ruling last November, a local judge, Jean Marcos Ferreira, took Romero's side. He gave the Kaiowa until late January to clear out.

The case was promptly appealed to a higher court in São Paulo. Just as the order to clear out was to take effect, Judge Sebastiao de Oliveira gave the Kaiowa a reprieve. Now they'll be able to stay on the land until a further ruling on Romero's claim to the property.

After months of deliberation, a final decision has not yet been handed down on this key question. And according to Carlos Marinho, an assistant to the president of FUNAI, it could be more than a year before the ruling is made. "There is no reason for the Guaraní to go on threatening mass suicide," he said, "because the decision to expel them was suspended."

Marinho emphasized that his organization is doing its best: "FUNAI can't be against the Indians because it is the organ that guarantees protection of Brazil's Indians. Have you got that straight?"

But when he visited the area last



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month, Ripper found that Romero's workers had already destroyed a cemetery where, the Kaiowa say, generations of their ancestors lie buried.

From its headquarters in San Francisco, the Rainforest Action Network has mounted an international letter-writing campaign, hoping to persuade an appeal-court judge that Ferreira's ruling ought to be overturned for good.

In his ruling, Judge Oliveira expressed irritation at the national and international pressure that has been exerted on the Indians' behalf. But he also noted the effect of the Indians' own pressure, as outlined in their suicide threat.

If they lose the final court decision, many of the affected Indians have informed FUNAI that they intend to die rather than be taken away from the land. The Kaiowa are known to refer to the land as "the great mother of us all."

Little else is left to them. In the words of the Rainforest Action Network, "Economic activities within their lands, such as cattle-ranching, have depleted the natural resource base on which the Guaraní depend. Having their lifestyle severely disrupted, the young and the elders feel humiliated and discouraged and have fallen into complete desperation."

Further dislocation in the Kaiowa's lives has been provoked by an influx of evangelical missionaries from the U.S. According to a recent article in the London Daily Telegraph, 30 Protestant sects are battling for converts among the Indians of Mato Grosso do Sul - a ratio of roughly one sect for every 1,000 Indians.

Some of the missionaries have instructed the Indians that their traditional culture and beliefs are the work of the devil. Ripper characterizes their work as "religious genocide." He describes the Guaraní as "a profoundly sad people."

"Eleven thousand Guaraní in Brazil have already lost their land," Borges added. "Many of them are living out of plastic bags along the roadside, dying of malnutrition and TB."