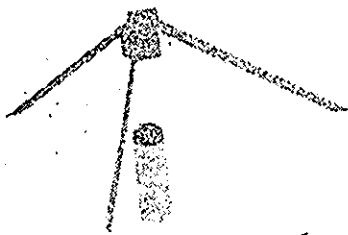


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## Brazilian Indians killing themselves

By KATHERINE ELLISON  
Herald Staff Writer

PANAMBIZINHO, Brazil — The bodies are found hanging from nylon cords, or slumped near cans of poison. Almost half of them are children or teenagers. And increasingly, they have brought these muddy cornfields near the Paraguayan border a desperate kind of fame.

Last year set a record for suicides among the Guarani Indians in villages near the booming western town of Dourados. Fifty-six killed themselves among a population of less than 22,500 — more than double last year's toll, and more than 50 times the rate of the rest of Bra-

### Lack of land being blamed

zil. Experts say it's the highest suicide rate among all native peoples in the Americas.

At a time of heightened debate over Brazil's 250,000 Indians, caught in the path of a westward expansion much like that of the 19th Century United States, the self-inflicted carnage has become a sad symbol of protest. It has drawn a steady troupe of psychologists, anthropologists, journalists and bureaucrats

here, and once or twice has even forced a normally hesitant government to act.

"The suicides have increased peoples' sensitivity," says anthropologist Rubem Thomas, a leading expert on the Guarani. "They've become a kind of political power."

Suicides were rare among the Guarani until the mid-1980s. But now they show no sign of slowing down. At least four new victims have been found so far

this year.

Behind many cases lie stories of alcohol abuse or marital squabbles or hopeless unemployment. But anthropologists who have studied the problem believe the root cause is lack of land. More than any other of Brazil's 180 ethnic groups, the Guarani have been squeezed into small reservations, effectively ending their traditional way of life.

In the past 10 years, Brazil's government has demarcated, or set aside, more Indian areas than ever before. Yet in the process it is increasingly facing legal and often violent challenges from powerful

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# Suicide rate high among Guarani Indians

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politicians, loggers, ranchers and gold-miners who call the native Brazilians a barrier to development.

In January, officials responded to the pressures with a presidential decree opening a new avenue for legal challenges to the demarcations. Under Decree 1775, non-Indians may challenge the demarcation of Indian lands at the federal level. Previously, challengers could sue in state courts, but the best they could do was slow the federal process.

Interested parties may appeal to the federal Justice Ministry within 90 days from Jan. 8, for already demarcated areas, or within 90 days of announcements of areas to be demarcated. The government Indian agency has 60 days to respond.

Government leaders contend the change guarantees a more transparent legal process. But critics hold that any step that may end up reducing Indian lands is a threat to the native peoples' survival, and they point to the Guarani as the nightmare vision of the future.

"God gave us the land, and before the whites came, we were spread over all of it," says Palito Akino, a 108-year-old cacique, or spiritual leader, in Panambizinho. "But they pushed and pushed us, and now they are pushing again."

## Crowded into reservations

Those who see Brazil's Indian policy as too generous wield one powerful statistic: 11 percent of the nation's territory is claimed by two-tenths of its population.

Yet here in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, Guarani-speaking Indians whose ancestors roamed over thousands of square miles stretching through Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil are crowded onto 22 small reservations.

Many of those villages were established between 1915 and 1928, and now are overpopulated as families have stayed on, dividing small plots among their children. Most densely populated of all is Dourados village, with 8,750 acres for 6,700 Indians. It is there that most of the suicides have taken place.

"The Guarani are confined in areas absolutely insufficient for their physical and cultural survival," says Antonio Brand, a historian who has studied the Indians since 1968.

Without sufficient land to farm, Guarani fathers are forced to leave their families for months



**PEOPLE OF TRADITION:** Members of Guarani tribe take part in a prayer dance.

KATHERINE ELLI SON / Herald staff

at a time to cut sugar cane for the region's alcohol stilleries, which produce sugar-cane fuel used in Brazilian cars. They are paid less than \$6 a day, out of which bosses charge for food and lodging.

## Taking out their shame

When the men come home after long absences, and with no money to show for it, they often end up taking out their shame in drinking and fighting with their wives, said Albino Nunes, a Guarani farming association leader

in Dourados. This was the case with Nunes' 13-year-old niece, whose husband hanged himself last year, leaving her pregnant. She killed herself one week later.

Compounding the problem, many experts believe, is that traditional authority has broken down as what were once different villages, with distinct governing groups, have been forced together on the same plots. Aggressive Christian missionary sects have increased the confusion, converting thousands of Guaranis.

Guaranis themselves say the weakening of their traditions has helped the suicide contagion to spread.

"Before, only the adults would know — the children would not be allowed to see it, and no one would speak of it," said Luciano Arevalo, a Dourados village captain, receiving visitors in the shade of a pepper tree. "Now, with each new death, all the children go, and when they become nervous, they copy it."

On a visit here last December, Justice Minister Nelson Jobim

appeared to adopt the view that easing land pressures might stem the suicide epidemic, when he gave Panambizinho some welcome news. For decades, the village's Guarani-Kaiowa residents, now numbering 255, have been squeezed onto a 150-acre plot. Jobim, in a decree, granted their long-standing claim to an additional 3,100 acres, which the government Indian agency, FUNAI, had stipulated was part of their traditional land.

## Big gap

Yet as Brazil's Indians have often learned before, there was a big gap between law and enforcement.

In this case, the problem was 39 non-Indian families who were already farming the land, having inherited parcels delivered by the federal government's land reform program 50 years ago. Not only have they filed suit, but in late January, 700 protesters blocked the nearest highway for 90 minutes with their trucks and tractors.

"Jobim came and made the decree right here in front of our house of prayer," said Waldomiro Oswaldo Akino, a vice-captain of Panambizinho. "But we can't use the land. We're like prisoners, afraid even to go out and cut wood."

FUNAI officials insist the land grant will ultimately be enforced. Indian rights groups predict life will get much worse for Brazil's Indians under the government's new decree.

"The result will surely be an escalation of violence against indigenous peoples, new invasions of indigenous lands ... environmental destruction and an increase in the number of suicides among the Guarani peoples, among others," writes Melina Selverston, director of the Washington-based Coalition for Amazon Peoples and their Environments.

## Suicide threat

Selverston was not the first to present the Guarani suicides as a tool to pressure the government. Last year, 220 Guarani-Kaiowa Indians living in village of Jaguaripe threatened to commit mass suicide, after a rancher won an injunction denying them the right to occupy demarcated land.

The threat worked; a federal judge struck down the injunction.

Yet with challenges to Indian reserves becoming ever more aggressive, the Guarani should probably beware of trying to test the limits of their tragic new political power.