

*Just got this!*

# Suspicion surrounds suicides by Brazil tribesmen

By MICHAEL ASTOR  
Associated Press

DOURADOS, Brazil — When Lindomar Cavalheiro turned up dead on a muddy roadside, a sleeveless T-shirt tightened around his neck, police quickly ruled it just another Indian suicide.

After all, Lindomar was a Guarani-Kaiowa, and his tribesmen have been killing themselves at an alarming rate for years.

Anthropologists studied them, journalists sounded the alarm, but the suicides persisted — 255 reported over a dozen years for the 20,000 Guarani-Kaiowas living on 22 reservations.

And it seems to be getting worse. After a decline from 56 suicides in 1995 to 17 last year, six Guarani-Kaiowa killed themselves in just six weeks over December and January.

Or so police say. Lindomar's father doesn't think so. For one thing, his 17-year-old son didn't own a sleeveless T-shirt, Cavalheiro says. And there was nothing near the body he could have hanged himself from, he adds.

"For the police, everything is a suicide," Cavalheiro says. "But Lindomar didn't kill himself. He was murdered."

Lindomar's death wasn't the only suspicious one at the reservation near Dourados city. A patch in the endless soybean fields of southwestern Brazil, 800 miles west of Rio de Janeiro, the Dourados reservation has been the scene of 121 of the Indian deaths classified as suicides over the past dozen years.

Police say Lindomar's uncle hanged himself in December from the leaf of a banana tree, barely strong enough to support a cat. Other official suicides are said to have hanged themselves while kneeling or standing on tip-toe.

Tribal chiefs charge that the two "captains" of the Dourados reservation's indigenous police force are behind some of the deaths. The chiefs complained, and federal police have reopened nine cases.

The captains, who serve as liaisons between the Indians and the Federal Indian Bureau, deny the accusations. They paint the allegations as a power play by the



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This Feb. 3, 1998, photo shows Guarani-Kaiowa Indians standing at the gate on their reservation in Dourados, Brazil.

chiefs, their political rivals.

Critics have offered no specific motive for any of the deaths they link to police. But Indians charge that officers of the indigenous police often treat people brutally and sometimes a death results.

No matter whether a particular case is a suicide or homicide, the violent deaths reflect a clash of values and lifestyles, of tribal traditions and Western influence. And the future of the Guarani-Kaiowa — and other Brazilian tribes — may ride on the outcome.

The conflict became apparent in the 1950s, when Brazilians began moving from the Atlantic coast into the nation's lightly populated interior — and traditional Indian lands.

In Dourados, the now-defunct Indian Protection Service created the post of "captain" in what many feel was an attempt to undermine the authority of chiefs and weaken Indian communities.

Luciano Arevalo is a captain as well as a minister at the God Is

Love evangelical church on the reservation. He considers the captains the community's true leaders and the chiefs essentially spiritual guides.

"We are being called criminals by some guys who have appointed themselves chiefs, and the press is supporting them just to pit Indian against Indian," Arevalo says.

Many Guarani-Kaiowa, in turn, question whether Arevalo is even an Indian, pointing to his Western features.

For Maucir Pauletti, legal adviser to the Catholic-linked Indigenous Missionary Council, the murder-or-suicide debate is beside the point.

"The internal violence has the same causes," he says.

Among them are the loss of ancestral lands, the encroachment of Western society and the erosion of traditional beliefs.

Originally hunter-gathers, the Guarani-Kaiowa once roamed over 35,000 square miles of thick for-

ests in southern Mato Grosso do Sul state and western Paraguay.

Today, the forest has been cut down to plant soybeans, and the Guarani-Kaiowa are confined to 22 reservations that together hold less than 1 percent of their ancestral lands.

Shelter often is little more than a tarpaulin-covered lean-to.

Disease and malnutrition are widespread — 7 percent of the Guarani-Kaiowa have tuberculosis.

The encroachment of Western society is most evident in the Dourados reservation, whose 8,719 acres are barely three miles from the center of Dourados city.

Indians slip into roadside bars and leave with bottles of the sugarcane liquor "cachaca" wrapped in newspaper, despite a ban on the sale of alcohol to Indians.

Evangelical churches dot the reservation, and many local farmers rent Indian land in exchange for part of the harvest.

For the Guarani-Kaiowa, about the only salaried work available is in the sugarcane fields of distilleries 125 miles to the south.

The work keeps the Indians away from home during the six-month harvest. When it ends, they return to unplanted fields and often go hungry until something grows, although the government provides a limited food allowance.

"When there is no work at the sugarcane fields, that's when the suicides begin," says Ramao Machado da Silva, who arranges jobs at the distilleries, reportedly in return for 10 percent of wages. "People drink more and go hungry. Most of the suicides are linked to family problems and to drinking."

The Guarani-Kaiowa says it is more than that.

"In our language there's a word, 'nhebasu,' that doesn't translate into Portuguese. It's a word that covers a lot of things that the white man's language doesn't," says Salvador Sanchez, whose 20-year-old nephew killed himself a few years ago.

"The white man has sadness, despair, difficulty, but *nhebasu* is more than that. The Indian feels *nhebasu*, and then he kills himself."

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FATHER OF LINDOMAR CAVALHEIRO