

VIEW FROM BRAZIL

A war against indigenous people

Jair Bolsonaro has many ways of denying indigenous people their right to land. 'Why in Brazil do we have to keep indigenous prisoners in reserves as if they were animals in zoos?' is one of them.

The President has promised there will be no more official demarcation of traditional indigenous land. At the same time, he has been working to 'liberate' the very same lands for economic exploitation by non-indigenous persons. His words have empowered cattle ranchers, soy farmers, loggers, miners and land grabbers. The invasion of indigenous lands and villages has been tolerated informally, resulting in escalating violence, including killings.

Consolidated statistics on this topic for the first year of Bolsonaro's presidency will be released by social movements in April. According to indigenous leaders, things are definitely worse. In one example, at the end of last year, four Guajajara indigenous people were murdered in the state of Maranhão, one of them a well-known defender of forests against loggers.

The government insists these are not political crimes. The Indigenous Missionary Council, linked to the Catholic Church, thinks otherwise. It believes the

violence is related to the government's push for natural wealth extraction from indigenous lands.

The Brazilian Indigenous Peoples' Association goes further: 'These crimes reflect the rise in hatred and savagery fomented by the perverse government of Jair Bolsonaro, which attacks us daily, denying our right to exist and instigating the historical disease of racism from which the Brazilian people still suffer.'

The president even blamed indigenous people for last year's devastating fires in the Amazon.

Some 98 per cent of indigenous lands are located in the Amazon region, and these are home to almost half of the country's indigenous peoples.

Take the case of the Guarani-Kaiowá, the largest indigenous groups outside the Amazon. In the state of Mato Grosso do Sul they are pushed into tiny reservations. While (mainly illegal) farmers have comfortably spread throughout the state, the indigenous people are denied demarcation of their 600,000-hectare traditional territories.

As a result, they are desperate and vulnerable to contemporary forms of slavery, accepting ever-lower salaries and suffering high levels of suicide.

'People are suffering from hunger in Guarani and Kaiowá communities. Kids are going to bed hungry,' indigenous representative Elizeu Pereira Lopes told me.

Anthropologist Spensy Pimentel, professor at the Universidade Federal do Sul da Bahia, has been keeping an eye on attacks in the Dourados region of Mato Grosso do Sul in recent months.



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He says: 'In theory, security guards on ranches and farms near the reservation – called "gunmen" by the indigenous people – only carry so-called "non-lethal weapons". In reality, a 14-year-old teenager died after being shot 18 times with one of these weapons. Another may lose his eyesight and one of the impact grenades left at the site last week ripped the fingers off a child's hand.'

Bolsonaro, meanwhile, resorts to conspiracy theory, saying there is an international plot to make indigenous areas independent from Brazil so that their resources and wealth can be exploited by others.

Indigenous people have never campaigned to be independent from Brazil. On the contrary, they want to feel effectively Brazilian by gaining their full citizenship – including their right to land. ●

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Thoughts from a Broad

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