

Struggle by indigenous to regain land in Brazil is deadly serious

DOURADOS, Brazil – In Brazil, the struggle by indigenous people to regain their right to the land once inhabited by their ancestors is deadly serious.

Ortiz Lopes, a member of the Guarani Kaiowa indigenous group who was murdered by a gunman July 8, was the 20th Guarani leader killed so far this year in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, according to the Catholic Church's Indigenous Missionary Council, known by its Portuguese acronym as CIMI.

Church workers who defend indigenous land rights also are targeted. Bishop Erwin Krautler of Xingu, president of CIMI and a staunch defender of indigenous communities, rubber tappers and Afro-Brazilian communities known as "quilombos," has been under 24-hour police protection since late last year after a message was posted on a Web site saying he would not live past Dec. 29.

CIMI recently denounced similar threats against Bishop Manoel Francisco of Chapeco, in southern Brazil, when an effigy was strung up with a sign warning that the bishop would hang "like Judas."

"Some time ago, (Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva) said Brazil faced obstacles to development and those obstacles needed to be overcome," Bishop Krautler told Catholic News Service. "In the president's view, those obstacles are indigenous people, residents of the quilombos, environmentalists and even the public ministry," which enforces court decisions returning land to indigenous groups.

Many of the murders of the Guarani have occurred when they have tried to reoccupy land that their parents or grandparents were forced to abandon in the mid- to late 1900s, when the government encouraged the expansion of large-scale agriculture in Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul.

Originally the Guarani were nomads, and their social structure is the extended family. When they attempt to move back onto land, they go unarmed, in family groups that are no match for the better-organized landowners, said Egon Heck, regional coordinator of CIMI in Mato Grosso do Sul.

"They have a strong belief that their gods and the spirits of their ancestors will help them overcome any obstacle," Heck told CNS. "There can be 50 armed men (with

the landowner) and 20 unarmed indigenous people, and they think they're going to win. It's a very unequal situation, with serious consequences for the indigenous people."

According to Guarani beliefs, God created the land, water, sun, stars and forest and sent the first Guarani "to look upon the beauty and care for it," said Anastacio Peralta, a Guarani leader and bilingual teacher in Dourados, a city of about 200,000 people near five Guarani reserves. Because an indigenous group's territory is associated closely with the people's ancestors, "land is very sacred to us," said Peralta. "It's not just any land."

That, along with the effects of the overcrowding to which the Guarani are subjected in the government-established reserves, is the force behind their efforts to regain their territory.

But the Guarani, like indigenous groups in other parts of the country, have come up against the harsh reality that their ancestral lands are coveted by mining companies, loggers, agribusinesses and government officials because of the natural resources they contain.

Nomadic Amazonian groups that shun contact with the outside world are among the most unprotected, Bishop Krautler said. When reserves are large enough to allow them to maintain their hunter-gatherer lifestyle, "people have the idea that it's too much land for too few Indians," the bishop said.

In northern Brazil, indigenous groups have come up against loggers and gold and diamond miners.

Some military officials and miners have proposed that indigenous lands registered on the country's mineral-rich northern border be nullified on the grounds that they are "a threat to national sovereignty," said Cristiano Navarro, a member of the CIMI team in Dourados. "Indigenous people are seen as foreigners in their own land, as if they were stealing land from the country. It's a nationalistic argument that's absurd."

Mato Grosso do Sul is valued for large-scale agriculture, especially soy, corn and, increasingly, sugar cane for ethanol production. Even when courts rule in favor of the Guarani, farm owners and government officials are often loathe to turn the land over to the indigenous communities.

Sugar cane plantations provide virtually the only employment available to Guarani men, who cut tons of cane by hand during the harvest for the equivalent of a few

dollars a day.

Father Jorge Dal Ben, an Italian Consolata missionary who has worked in Brazil for 38 years, said the situation faced by the Guarani is similar to the one he encountered in Roraima in northern Brazil, where indigenous people labored under inhumane conditions for diamond miners, loggers and ranchers.

"They had no hope," he said.

Gradually, however, the situation in Roraima changed. After more than three decades of organizing, struggling, planning and drawing international attention to their plight, the five indigenous groups where Father Dal Ben worked won recognition for the 6,700-square-mile Raposa Serra do Sol reserve.

Father Dal Ben was on the verge of retiring when he was asked to move to Dourados to work with the Guarani.

Compared to the groups in Roraima, the Guarani "have some huge advantages," Father Dal Ben told CNS. "They still speak their language. They have kept their rituals. They have been affected by some (outside) factors," but maintain much of their culture, he said.

And they are tenacious.

"There are people camping along the highway" beside lands they claim as theirs, he said. "They have an incredible capacity for resistance, but they are not well organized."

In Roraima, he said, five indigenous groups overcame their rivalries and established a common cattle-ranching business.

"When I arrived in Raposa Serra do Sol, there were no young people. There were only small children," Father Dal Ben said. Youths had moved away in search of jobs. Now that there are economic opportunities at home, however, young people are staying in the communities.

The Italian priest sees a similar situation in Mato Grosso do Sul, where young people "have the sense that there is no future," he said. "We need to have the courage to attack the causes of the problems."

Regaining land is part of the battle. Making the land productive again will be the next step, and once more the Guarani have an advantage over the groups in Raposa Serra do Sol because "the land is more fertile here than in the North," Father Dal Ben said.

With enough land, the Guarani could plant crops "according to their traditional

system, which is very good," he said, "producing (food) for themselves and not for other people."

Above all, he said, "It is crucial to rebuild the people's confidence."

That confidence has eroded in the face of many obstacles. The 1980 Brazilian Constitution set a five-year time limit for demarcating indigenous territories, but the Guarani are still waiting.

Despite the odds, Father Dal Ben finds hope in the Gospel.

"My outlook on life comes from the good news," he said. "If we want life to spring forth in this world, in a world of brotherhood, dignity and respect, we have to build it."