
Brazil: Purchase of land held under false title as part of land grabbing for the expansion of pulp plantations

The violence and plunder initially carried out by a gang of outlaws and thugs continued in the 1990s with the arrival of the forestry company Veracruz Florestal, which founded the company now known as Veracel Celulose. In August 1994, brothers Geraldo and Derolino ("Dedé") saw their lands "confiscated" by force. Taking advantage of the fact that the two had gone to the city of Eunápolis, leaving two workers to take care of their crops and livestock, armed and hooded men working for Veracruz violently burst onto their property and forced the workers to leave. Upon their return, the brothers were faced with a devastating scene: their house and crops half destroyed, their belongings strewn about, their animals killed.

In the following days, the brothers tried unsuccessfully to speak with the company directors. They subsequently attempted to return to their lands, but there were armed men blocking every entryway to their property. They tried the legal route, but this also failed.

This is just one of hundreds of stories of invasions, destruction of property and even the murder of peasant farmers without land titles, recorded over the course of more than 20 years in the police stations of numerous cities in the region. However, not a single one of these crimes has ever even given rise to legal proceedings.

These were not isolated incidents, but rather the result of an organized process in which big companies were directly or indirectly involved. Those companies initially included Indústrias Cabrália S/A, Florestas Nipo Brasileiras (Flonibra) – which purchased land acquired through these means over the course of many years – and Brasil Holanda de Indústria S/A (Bralanda), a Dutch logging multinational with a hefty record of land invasions, acts of violence and murder. They evicted over a hundred small peasant farmers from lands in Vale Verde, in the municipality of Porto Seguro, Bahia.

The acquisition of land through the use of falsified land titles, known in Brazil as grilagem, was spurred by the inclusion of new areas of the far south of the state of Bahia for the expansion of industrial tree plantations for pulp production. Two centres of this activity were created, one in the extreme south and the other on the north coast. The initial investment was provided by Compañía Vale do Rio Doce (CVRD), in partnership with Japan Brazil Pulp Resources Development Co. (JBP). The two companies created the joint venture Flonibra, which also acquired thousands of hectares of land under false title, or terras griladas, from Indústrias Cabrália.

During this entire process of land invasions, Flonibra deforested vast areas for the exploitation of timber, which it sold to Japan and to European countries.

The final assault, beginning in the 1980s, was headed by the company Bahia Sul Celulose, in the municipality of Mucuri. In the early 1990s, in the micro-region of Eunápolis, Grupo Odebrecht established Veracruz Florestal, the precursor to Veracel Celulose.

Social movements, the NGO Cepedes – based in Eunápolis – and even the Public Ministry itself have denounced this company for illegally occupying thousands of hectares of public land and acquiring landholdings under false title.

The extreme south of the state of Bahia has become a centre of the pulp industry, and is now essentially one big eucalyptus plantation generating tax revenues for the Brazilian government. But the implementation of this means of “development” has resulted in enormous social and environmental liabilities, victimizing hundreds of families who now live on the periphery of the region’s cities, with no life prospects and without the slightest chance of returning to the lands from which they were evicted.

Around two years ago, however, brothers Geraldo and Dedé returned to and reoccupied a part of the lands where they used to live. In response, Veracel sent two officials, who acknowledged that this area did not belong to the company.

“I lived here for part of my life, and I will stay here for the rest of it,” said Geraldo. In the midst of the eucalyptus trees, he and his brother built a clay house and planted crops which have already yielded their first harvests. This has allowed them to experience once again the joys of sowing and harvesting.

This good news about the land recovered by these two peasant farmer brothers is accompanied by another piece of good news: on November 20, 2013, the Federal Public Ministry office in São Mateus, Espírito Santo initiated legal action against the company Fibria S/A (formerly Aracruz Celulose), the State of Espírito Santo and the Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES), calling for the annulment of the titles to public lands granted by the government to Aracruz Celulose. These lands were acquired through a fraudulent process in which the company used its own workers to sign statements posing as small farmers, in order to purchase and gain legal title to public lands that were immediately handed over to the company.

In addition to the return of public property that was acquired through illegal land occupation, the Public Ministry is requesting that, once the customary tenure of these lands by quilombola communities (1) is demonstrated, legal title to them should be granted to the communities of San Mateo and Conceição da Barra. In addition, in view of the deprivation of the right of the quilombola communities to occupy these lands, the Ministry is calling for Fibria to pay compensation for collective damages to the tune of one million reais (roughly 430,000 US dollars).

The suit filed also calls for BNDES to halt any financing to Fibria for the purpose of establishing eucalyptus plantations for pulp production on the lands in question for 30 days.

(1) Quilombola communities are traditional communities of descendants of Africans who were brought to Brazil by force in the colonial era to work as slaves.

Based on the article “Grilagem terceirizada”, by journalist Teoney Araújo Guerra, and a press release from the Federal Public Ministry office in Espírito Santo, “MPF/ES entra com ação contra antiga Aracruz Celulose por grilagem de terras públicas”, published in EcoDebate, <http://www.ecodebate.com.br/2013/12/06/mpfes-entra-com-acao-contra-antiga-aracruz-celulose-por-grilagem-de-terras-publicas/>

