
Brazil: The monoculture eucalyptus company, Veracel Celulosa, is trying to evict indigenous Pataxó from their land

The Pataxós of Nueva Esperanza village—in the municipality of Itamarajú in the southern tip of Bahía state—are under threat of eviction. The Brazilian government has already formally recognized a 52,100-hectare area, part of Barra Velha, as belonging to the Pataxós. Nevertheless, the government has not yet issued the declaratory decree, an action which would end the constant violence against the inhabitants of Nueva Esperanza and the roughly 7,000 Pataxós who live in the territory. The Pataxós are denouncing the government's delay, as well as the impacts caused by Veracel Celulosa, a company owned by transnational Swedish-Finlandish Stora Enso (50%) and Fibria (50%). The indigenous Pataxós are fighting Veracel Celulosa's attempts to evict them, while trying to survive on a mere 20 hectares of land surrounded by the company's eucalyptus trees.

The Portuguese colonizers, impressed with the natural beauty and abundant potential of the integrated colonial economy, started the process of conquest of this region, long known as the southern tip of Bahía. The large tropical forests throughout the region, with their vast mangroves and “*mussurunga*,” supported the economy for over two centuries, which was based on logging primarily for naval and civil constructions. The complex geographic landscape, formed by a plain giving way to high and lush reliefs rising 24 km from the coast, was an obstacle to the expanding occupation. With heights of 200 to 900 meters above sea level, the landscape served as shelter for the natives who were not allied with the colonists. Historical accounts illustrate the beauty and characteristics of the landscape, such as the one from Austrian prince Maximiliano de Nied-Nieuwied who crossed the region in 1816. These accounts also describe the strategy of indigenous peoples to take refuge in the abundant forests of the regions, as in the case of the Pataxós (1).

Like many others indigenous groups in Brazil, the Pataxós have suffered expropriation of their lands since colonization, but there are also many Pataxós living in the southern tip of Bahía in the Monte Pascoal region. On September 1st, 1991 and after many struggles, through Decree No. 1393 they obtained demarcation of a 8,628-hectare territory called Barra Velha de Monte Pascoal. However, the Pataxós living within and around this territory are calling for the boundaries to be revised to cover 52,100 hectares. In 2008 the Brazilian government recognized that the Pataxós have traditionally occupied the 52,100 hectares, and that this territory is essential for their physical and cultural survival. About 24,000 of the 52,100 hectares are part of a Conservation Unit, which is Monte Pascoal Park for the Pataxós. This recognition is based on publication of the demarcation report, which is the basis for the new territorial limits in the Official Journal of the Union. Nonetheless, the Ministry of Justice has not issued the declaratory decree, alleging there are six security mandates, i.e. prosecutions, against the demarcation, from property owners and municipal regional governments, such as the City Council of Porto Seguro and Prado. Consequently, the violence continues.

Apart from property owners, the other main invader in Pataxó territory is the eucalyptus pulp production company, Veracel Celulosa. In the case of Nueva Esperanza village, the area the Pataxó

reoccupied in March 2013—within the already demarcated 52,100-hectares of Barra Velha—was threatened when Veracel Celulose went to court to try to evict the Pataxó from this area. The first judge who tried the case (0002592-59.2013.4.01.3310) decided to allow the Pataxó to remain in their territory—in consideration of the demarcation the Brazilian government already made—and opted to wait for the government's declaratory decree. However a new judge recently took over the case, and is threatening to review the former judge's decision and evict the 35 Pataxós families living there, almost 160 people of all ages.

Since 2013 the Pataxó of Nueva Esperanza have been trying to survive on a mere 20 hectares, surrounded by Veracel's eucalyptus plantations. Where there used to be eucalyptus trees, the Pataxó now grow food such as cassava and pineapple to support their families. But they still suffer the impacts of Veracel's eucalyptus plantations on a daily basis, and experience extreme water shortages. A prolonged drought is intensifying the already devastating impacts of large-scale eucalyptus monoculture. The Pataxó indicate an area where eucalyptus trees growing close to water springs have destroyed these sources, making it necessary for them to dig a well to guarantee minimal water supply for their families.

Another severe impact is Veracel's pesticide spraying. The Pataxó report that Veracel has been spraying pesticides from small planes lately, in order to kill caterpillars that attack the eucalyptus trees. But the aerial spraying is also affecting the Pataxó families who essentially live inside the plantations. Inhabitants claim they were not notified about these sprayings, and that don't have knowledge about the products. What they do know is that the products have caused various illnesses such as itching and respiratory problems, mainly among the children. They claim the company has only brought misfortune, and that the promises it made to the community were a lie. They compare Veracel to Alvares Cabral, the first Portuguese explorer who came to Brazil, beginning the era of colonial rule. They make this comparison saying that Cabral had the same objective then as Veracel does today: to evict indigenous peoples from their territories.

The Pataxó of Nueva Esperanza dream of having a dignified life, which would mean control over their territory so that they can live well within it, and see their children and grandchildren be born and live in peace. “Our population is growing and our area is too small to feed our children with dignity and health. We cannot endure another invasion that destroys our land and people,” says one of their leaders.

Veracel is a company certified by the FSC certification (Forest Stewardship Council). The company claims on its webpage that it “understands, respects and contributes to indigenous causes” (2). Veracel's FSC certification has been denounced many times, yet not even the most serious complaints have managed to get its certification revoked (3). This proves that the FSC and its members—companies, NGOs and other civil society organizations—are complicit in the situation, since they have taken no measures despite many complaints over time.

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1. Cancela, F (2012), “*Del proyecto a proceso colonial: ‘indios, colonos y autoridades regias en la colonización reformista de la antigua capitanía de Porto Seguro (1763-1808)*”, Salvador, p. 36-38

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2. <http://www.veracel.com.br/relacionamento-com-a-comunidade/comunidades-indigenas/>
 3. <http://wrm.org.uy/?s=veracel>