
Brazil: International campaign against rural violence in the Amazon

A team comprising Alvaro Santos, Emiliano Camacho and the author travelled from Montevideo, Uruguay to the state of Para in the Brazilian Amazon in the framework of a national and international campaign on “An end to violence in rural areas!” “Cut out this scourge from the root!” promoted by the Latin American Secretariat of the International Union of Food workers (Rel-UITA) and the Brazilian National Confederation of Agricultural Workers (CONTAG), against rural violence in that country. The purpose was to film a documentary video gathering testimonials regarding some of the dozens of cases of rural leaders that have either been murdered or threatened with death.

These people are struggling in the front line where “grileiros” burn thousands and thousands of hectares of forest to appropriate the land, with no papers – and in the event they do have papers, they are always false – exploiting it during the few years soil fertility lasts, until irremediably it turns into a desert. The association between wealthy adventurers, retired or serving military personnel who have founded their own feudal dynasties (starting in the sixties during the years of dictatorship) and those exporting precious wood, razing to the ground almost 40 per cent of the best Brazilian Amazon timber -and still advancing- and the cattle-ranchers and soya bean growers that cover vast tracts of bootlegged land, are such a powerful factor that, save for a few honourable exceptions, they are able to demolish Justice, the Police and the local political system.

The 40-minute video prepared on this occasion* tells three of these stories to help understand how this social and environmental massacre carried out in the Amazon turns into a drama of survival on a personal, individual level. To get an idea of the magnitude of the disaster, it is enough to mention a few facts:

- During the period of the Brazilian military dictatorship alone (1964-1985), 10 million hectares of Amazon forest were given over to settlements. Most of this land was distributed among high ranking military officials.
- Since then, over 1,550 murders have taken place, associated with disputes over land between powerful landowners and landless peasants or rural worker leaders. Between 1985 and 2004 alone, 560 murders were denounced relating to this cause.
- Of these, the police investigated a mere 30 per cent, only 6 per cent led to legal proceedings and in only 3 per cent of the cases were the merits of the cause determined, the suspects nearly always being absolved due to “lack of evidence.” In short, cases in which a conviction was made were less than one per cent and the intellectual authors of the murders were practically never tried.
- Because of this inefficiency on the part of the legal and police system, 300 murder cases have already been prescribed as unenforceable.
- In 2003, 35 thousand families were recorded as having been evicted from their plots of land, in 2004 this figure was 37 thousand and in 2005 the figure dropped to “only” 26 thousand families. However, partial figures for the current year lead us to suppose that there will be an increase in the number of

families evicted from rural areas in relation to the previous year.

- The Brazilians call people who have become landowners by “stealing” fiscal land “grileiros.” Very often this involves thousands of hectares. These grileiros open up a gap in the forest, where large trucks can enter and leave. Then they log all the timber with a high market value and burn the rest. Satellite photos show the hundreds of fires taking place every day, where high spirals of smoke rise from the whole of the Amazon forest, from Bolivia to Venezuela.
- After burning this “useless forest” the grileiros fake title deeds with the complicity of corrupt local authorities and fence in their new “acquisition.” With this procedure there are landowners who have managed to accumulate over 200 thousand hectares. First of all they bring in cattle to “tame” the forest soil, and then they plant transgenic soya bean, with massive use of the herbicide glyphosate for weed control.
- In the city of Santarem, in the heart of the forest and on the River Amazon, the transnational corporation Cargill has built, without any type of permit, its own port and the largest soya bean deposits in the world, where it stores the soya beans grown in these illegal farms.
- According to official and conservative estimates, some 100 million hectares have been “griladas” in the whole of Brazil, some 90 per cent alone located in the Amazon. This area is as large as the whole of Central America and Mexico put together.
- Proposals for agrarian reform made by civil society set out a rational use of the forest: out of the total amount of land allocated to a community or to a farming family, the owners are authorized to cultivate 20 per cent and acquire a commitment to conserve the other 80 per cent where they can only carry out sustainable extractive activities. Land ownership is associated with fulfilling this commitment.
- In the opinion of trade unions and local peasant associations, the present government has made notorious efforts to change the situation. For example, over the past few years, 17,325 people who were subject to slave labour in ranches distant from populated centres were freed. In 2005 federal resources to resolve and prevent these conflicts were increased fourfold. Laws protecting important areas of the Amazon were adopted (that will have to be enforced), but the aspirations and needs of the communities concerned have still to be fulfilled. A law was adopted for the protection of Quilombola communities**. Among other initiatives and actions, a programme for geo-referencing the “hot frontier” of the Amazon forest corresponding to the areas most attacked by grileiros and logging companies has started to be implemented, under the responsibility of the Brazilian army.
- In spite of this, the pace of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon remains at approximately 2 million hectares per year and changes agreed on in the capital often take years in reaching the concrete locations where communities and rural workers suffer from the consequences of the landowners’ - the powerful ones - impunity and absolutism.

Rel-UITA and CONTAG’s national and international campaign is already showing positive results such as the visit by European trade union delegations and parliamentarians to the Brazilian government and to the area of Para with the aim of appraising in situ the complaint. The presence of Federal Police in the zone and strengthening of economic and human resources for the Public Ministry in the region have raised hope for change. However, the experience accumulated over so many years of struggle prevents any social organization from dropping its guard and they all are active and alert.

By Carlos Amorín, Rel-UITA. The complete version of this article -in Spanish- can be accessed at:
<http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Brasil/Para.html>

*“En la frontera del miedo. Historias de vida y muerte” (At the frontier of fear. Stories of life and death,” Direction and script: Carlos Amorín and Alvaro Santos; Cameras: Emiliano Camacho, Alvaro Santos, César Ramos; Edition: Fabián Arocena; Made by: Osmedia (www.osmedia.com.uy); Production: Rel-UITA (www.rel-uita.org), CONTAG (www.contag.org.br). For information on the video: uita@rel-uita.org

** Quilombos: Communities of descendents of African runaway slaves