
Brazil: Tupinikim and Guarani peoples restart their struggle against Aracruz

In 1979, when occupying one of the last remaining forest areas of the Mata Atlântica (Atlantic Rainforest), not yet cut by the former Aracruz Florestal --currently Aracruz Celulose-- the Tupinikim and Guarani indigenous peoples in the State of Espírito Santo started a long struggle to get their lands back. This struggle was interrupted in 1998, when Tupinikim and Guarani indigenous communities, isolated and under great pressure, had to sign an agreement with Aracruz Celulose.

The agreement derived from an unconstitutional decision of the former Minister of Justice, Íris Rezende, who, in March 6, 1998 demarcated only 2.571 hectares out of 13.579 hectares that were recognized as Tupinikim and Guarani indigenous lands by an official technical team of the National Indigenous Foundation (Fundação Nacional do Índio--FUNAI), an agency of the federal government in charge of the demarcation of indigenous lands. Challenging such decision, the indigenous peoples carried out, on their own, the demarcation of the 13.579 hectares. However, eight days after the start of the self-demarcation, the process was abruptly interrupted due to the joint action of the federal police, the FUNAI and the Company, against the indigenous people. Afterwards, they were pressed to sign the agreement and they had to waive their right to the 11.008 hectares of lands recognized as indigenous lands.

After seven years of coexistence with the Agreement, the Tupinikim and Guarani reached the conclusion that it is not solving their problems, but on the contrary, they have become more economically dependent on Aracruz. It has also contributed to the division of communities and has substantially weakened their culture. Apart from that, communities were waiving their right to the 11.008 hectares of indigenous lands identified and recognized as such.

But for Aracruz, the Agreement has been very beneficial, because of the fact that under such Agreement, apart from exploiting intensively the indigenous lands, the Company has been able to show to the public that it coexists in good terms with the Tupinikim and Guarani and that there is nothing that places at a stake its image of "company that complies with its social and environmental responsibilities". As a faithful adherent to the capitalist logic, the Company has always believed that money can buy anything, including rights guaranteed by the Federal Constitution of Brazil. However, it has forgotten that the land is a condition for the physical and cultural survival of indigenous peoples and that they are doomed to disappear if they lack lands, as has happened with hundreds of other peoples decimated by the colonization process of the Brazilian territory over the past 500 years.

That is why the Tupinikim and Guarani of the seven indigenous villages, gathered in a general meeting held on February 19, 2005, decided to restart the struggle for the 11.008 hectares of indigenous lands not demarcated yet. After the general meeting, the Tupinikim and Guarani sought the support of the lawful agency primarily in charge of the defence of their interests: the Federal Department of Public Prosecution. As a result of the meetings with chiefs and leaders, this department filed on March 31, a public civil investigation in order to determine irregularities in the process of demarcation of Tupinikim and Guarani lands in 1998, with the aim of guaranteeing that all the lands recognized as indigenous lands are effectively demarcated as soon as possible in

accordance with the Constitution.

Indigenous peoples also sought the support of entities, movements, churches and parliamentarians, within Brazil and abroad. They know that they need much support from civil society in order to join forces in their struggle against a company that is supported by the federal government and several parties, including left-wing parties. It's worth remembering that Aracruz Celulose is among the three major financiers of political-electoral campaigns in the country. In the case of the federal government, the support is received through loans from the Brazilian Development Bank (Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social–BNDES) and incentives through the National “Forest” Plan. The latter aims at increasing the plantation of tree monocultures in the country in 2 million hectares before 2007.

In addition to regaining possession of 11.008 hectares, the Tupinikim and Guarani shall face another great challenge in the near future which is the reconversion, that is to say, what to do with a land covered with eucalyptus. In that sense, the communities organized on April 28 and 29, in the Tupinikim village of Irajá, the meeting “Replant our hope” (Encontro Replantar a Nossa Esperança). At that meeting, several communities impacted by the eucalyptus monoculture –indigenous people, representative of “quilombolas” (communities of slave descendants) and farmers- exchanged experiences of resistance to the “green desert”. In the meeting itself, the Tupinikim and Guarani started to prepare a plan of reconversion of the areas planted with eucalyptus by Aracruz into other uses, such as reforestation with native species and production of food.

We must add that the much publicised integration of local communities to the agribusiness project –which is the proposal of companies such as Aracruz, and of the Brazilian State- in practice leads to the disappearance of cultures and diversity. In Brazil, two opposing projects are becoming more and more apparent: one of them represented by hegemonic sectors that deal with the land as a means to obtain profits easily; and the other represented by movements such as MST (Landless Workers’ Movement), MPA (Small Farmers Movement) and indigenous peoples and “quilombolas”, that see lands as their livelihoods. In the case of the Guarani and Tupinikim, the relationship with the land is even deeper, because they consider land as Mother Earth, that must be kept and protected. In such sense, one of the participants in the “Replant our hope” meeting made such contradiction clear by saying that: “To plant eucalyptus is not to replant our hope!”

Finally, the Tupinikim and Guarani are teaching an important lesson to the societies of Espírito Santo and Brazil, because they dare to dream and challenge the existing power structures. They propose a way to guarantee their autonomy in the future, on the basis of their rights and strengthening of their culture.

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