
Brazil: The struggle of the Pataxó indigenous peoples in Bahia

More than a year ago, the Pataxó indigenous peoples re-took an important part of their traditional territory located in the state of Bahia (see WRM Special Bulletin May 2000). Since then, they have been struggling to have their rights recognized by the government, with little support from environmental organizations, many of whom seem to deny them their capacity to manage the forest that rightly belongs to them.

Within such context, it is important to highlight the Brazilian Anthropologic Society's position, which has recently criticised the Ministry of the Environment for its promotion of projects in the area before the demarcation of the Pataxó's lands is finalized. In a letter addressed to the government, the Coordinator of the Commission for Indigenous Affairs of the Anthropologic Society --anthropologist Silvio Coelho dos Santos-- expressed that "without even knowing the extension and demarcation of the territory traditionally occupied by the Pataxó there cannot be sufficient information on which to base the adequate support to self-sufficiency for the indigenous villages." This position is extremely important at his moment, when there appears to be a systematic movement against the indigenous presence within conservation areas.

This is the case of the Pataxó, whose traditional territory was declared the Monte Pascoal National Park following their violent expulsion in 1961. After the indigenous people re-took their land in August 1999, the government established a Technical Working Group to carry out the demarcation of the Pataxó areas. However, due to political pressures, the work of the Technical Group was never finalized.

During the period, the Brazilian Environment Institute (IBAMA) tried by all means to remove the indigenous people from the Park. However, as a result of their determination to remain there, IBAMA changed its strategy to project proposals for "sustainable development." According to the Brazilian Anthropologic Society, the aim of such projects is to generate internal tensions and conflicts among the Pataxó. Silvio Coelho agrees that the existence of important areas of the threatened Mata Atlantica forest in the park fully justifies the presence and responsibility of the Ministry of the Environment for its conservation, but that that is not dependent on formal ownership over the territory. "There is no evidence to believe that this natural heritage is now especially threatened or vulnerable as a result of the occupation of the park by the Pataxó fourteen months ago; on the contrary, the opposite appears to be true."

The anthropologist has formally requested the relevant government officials to carry out immediately the studies for the demarcation of the indigenous lands, while at the same time to channel resources "to support the needs of the Pataxó in Monte Pascoal National Park."

At the same time, other Pataxó living in Bahia are facing problems. On November 29, the military police expelled some 150 Pataxó families which were camping in a 20-hectare area within the municipality of Prado in the state of Bahia. The police action resulted from a legal complaint from two cattle ranchers. The indigenous people were camping there awaiting the finalization of the demarcation of their land at Barra do Caí, from which they had been expelled following the takeover

of their land by another cattle rancher.

The Pataxó decided to leave the area peacefully in order to avoid a confrontation and immediately organized a demonstration in town against the police action and FUNAI's lack of will to finalize the demarcation of the indigenous lands in Barra do Caí.

Five hundred years ago the Portuguese invaded all the indigenous lands in Brazil. Some of them have been now turned back to their legitimate owners, but many are yet to be returned. This is the case of the Pataxó. They need more support to their unequal struggle and the Anthropologic Society's position constitutes an example to be followed by many Brazilian organizations which have until now not taken sides with the Pataxó's fair struggle.

Article based on information from CIMI (Conselho Indigenista Missionário), Informe n.º 439, 30/11/00, 'ABA critica ministério do meio ambiente e pede urgência para a conclusão da demarcação'.