
Brazil: the same as 500 years ago?

Five hundred years ago, Portuguese conquistadores in shining armour used their modern weapons against indigenous peoples armed with bows and arrows. Now, police in shining riot gear used their modern weapons against unarmed civilians including indigenous, black and white people protesting against the official celebration of the arrival of the Portuguese in 1500. The photographs are self explanatory (see photos at http://www.wrm.org.uy/english/tropical_forests/photospataxo2.html). The reason? Again the "indians".

Towards the end of March this year, indigenous peoples throughout the country left their villages and began to travel in the direction of Porto Seguro, the place where Brazil was allegedly "discovered", thus going in the opposite direction of the one taken in 1500 by the European colonizers. Within an atmosphere of expectation, on April 15 most of them gathered together at Monte Pascoal, the National Park re-taken last year by the Pataxó, which then became a strong symbol of the struggle of all the indigenous peoples of the country, where still more than half of their lands have not yet been demarcated. More than 1500 indigenous people joined the 22 Pataxó families and celebrated the meeting with rituals, songs and speeches, giving their total support to the struggle of the Pataxó.

On April 7th, they all headed for the village of Coroa Vermelha, in Pataxó territory, distant some 200 kilometres from Monte Pascoal and near the site of the "discovery": Porto Seguro. More than 30 buses which were carrying them were stopped by the first of many police blockades set up by the government to assure "public security", involving more than 5000 military police. The buses were only allowed to continue as a result of the direct intervention of the country's General Attorney. Having finally arrived at Coroa Vermelha, on the following day they opened the Indigenous Conference 2000, counting with the presence of 2500 representatives from 186 different indigenous peoples from all over the country, thus being the largest indigenous meeting held in the whole history of Brazil.

During the 4-day Conference, the indigenous peoples managed to be at the forefront of the news coverage on the 500 years, showing their strength and indignation regarding the official celebrations. While the government was preparing and organizing very expensive and excluding celebrations, ignoring the real history of the country, the indigenous peoples managed -with minimal resources- to make public their history, their cultural wealth, their wisdom and their proposals for the next 500 years, involving respect for their rights, mainly the demarcation of their lands, as well as health and education adapted to their reality. They showed great strength and true unity, while the government was trying to show a false unity of all the Brazilian people and a strength based on the presence of thousands of military police.

Then April 22 came, the day of the "discovery" by Pedro Alvares Cabral in 1500. It was meant to be a great day for the President of Brazil, together with his Portuguese colleague, showing the world that Brazil is a great nation with a happy people: a day of victory! But it was a day of defeat, a day reflecting the way in which the Brazilian government treats its people, particularly the original inhabitants: the indigenous peoples. It first tried to convince the 2500 indigenous representatives of not holding their protest on the 22nd, but to choose 20 of them to hand a document to the President. Their response was that they wished to speak with him, but at a different moment, because the 22nd

was not a day to have a photograph taken with the President, but a day of remembrance of the genocide of more than 5 million indigenous people during the 500 years of the history of Brazil!

The response generated great tension. The government opted for wholesale repression. It prevented the entrance to Porto Seguro of people from all over the country, it prevented several movements getting together and prevented any type of protest. The police attacked a demonstration of more than 2000 indigenous people with tear gas and rubber bullets. In this way, April 22nd became a day of total defeat for the government. The image of an indigenous person -Gildo Terena- asking the riot police to stop their violence went around the world, terrifying a government always very concerned about the image of Brazil abroad.

The indigenous people, sad and outraged, but proud about their resistance and unity, realize that they are now beginning a new stage in their struggle and that nothing much seems to have changed in these 500 years. The government gave them the same treatment as the one given by the colonizers in 1500, when one of the major genocides in history began. They will need all their strength and unity to enter this new phase of Brazilian history. And it is from Monte Pascoal, the place where colonization began and was re-taken by the Pataxó, that the indigenous peoples promise to "re-take" Brazil and to contribute, with full respect to their rights, to the construction of a country without exclusion, truly pluri-ethnic and multi-cultural.

By: Conselho Indigenista Missionario-ES