Brazil: the struggle of the Pataxó-Hã-Hã-Hãe

The indigenous people Pataxó-Hã-Hã-Hãe are claiming their territorial rights on an area of 53,000 hectares in the Southern Region of the State of Bahia, which contain remnants of the once luxurious "mata atlantica" forest that spread along the Ocean coast. These lands, converted into pastures, were invaded by ranchers, which are using them for cattle raising and, in some areas, for planting cacao. Such use of the land after massive deforestation has caused severe environmental impacts on soils and on water supplies. In 1936 the lands of the Pataxó-Hã-Hã-Hãe were demarcated, but gradually invaded by some 300 ranchers ("fazendeiros"), who even got land titles from local authorities. In order to get these ranchers out, the State Agency on Indigenous Peoples' Issues (FUNAI) went to court in 1983 trying to prove that the land titles given to the ranchers were totally invalid, once the lands had already been declared to be indigenous. The case is now being considered by the Federal High Court.

Some time ago, the Pataxó-Hã-Hã-Hãe carried out a direct action and recovered part of their lands that had been usurped by the "fazendeiros." They also demanded the liberation of their leader Cacique Gerson de Souza Melo, who was arbitrarily imprisoned last December 15th under the accusation of having participated in the murder of two policemen in the conflict area. An international campaign for the immediate release of the indigenous leader was launched and a week later he was released. Nevertheless, provocation and threats against the Pataxó-Hã-Hã-Hãe continue.

The Pataxó-Hã-Hã-Hãe are supporting the related Pataxó indigenous peoples who occupied Monte Pascoal National Park in August 1999 (see WRM Bulletins 26 and 28). They are also preparing counter-celebrations to the 500th anniversary of the "discovery" of Brazil by the Portuguese.