
[Brazil: Pataxo recover traditional lands](#)

Brazil will soon celebrate the 500th anniversary of the arrival of the Portuguese. Nevertheless, for the indigenous peoples living in what later became Brazil, this is not a day for celebration. The arrival of the Europeans meant the beginning of their genocide and the destruction of the environment in the rich land of the "pau Brasil". When Brazil became an independent state, the situation of indigenous peoples did not improve and in many cases became even worse. The Federal Constitution of 1988 finally recognized the indigenous peoples' cultural and territorial rights, but they are in fact more often than not ignored.

Last August 19, the Pataxo indigenous people, who live in the southern region of the state of Bahia, decided to recover Monte Pascoal National Park, which is part of their traditional territory. The presence of the Pataxo in the region was already documented in year 1500 and later by several historical testimonies from 1805 on. They had lived in that area until 1951 when they were victims of a massacre. The survivors were expelled from their land and confined in areas where they lived in misery and humiliation. This was yet another dark episode in Brazilian history which, as many others where the victims were black slaves or landless peasants, was soon hidden and forgotten. The Pataxo's traditional territory was later transformed into Monte Pascoal National Park, allegedly with the aim of protecting the Mata Atlantica forest.

The Ministry of the Environment and some media have tried to discredit the Pataxo to the eyes of public opinion by accusing them of destroying the forest, while in fact the Pataxo have played an important role in the conservation of the Mata Atlantica forest in the region. On the other hand, loggers have for years been openly extracting the most valuable trees from the National Park, with the police turning a blind eye on their activities.

This action cannot then be considered an illegal occupation. On the contrary, the Pataxo are exercising their rights, recognized by the Brazilian Constitution under "indigenous traditional occupation". This means that they have the original right of occupation and that land titling and other judicial decisions affecting the area must be considered illegal. In spite of this, the Brazilian Indigenous National Fund (FUNAI), instead of protecting the indigenous peoples' rights -as it is mandated to- is now trying to seduce the Pataxo by proposing them to abandon their lands in return for some consumer goods.

The Brazilian authorities' international discourse on the need to protect the country's forests has got in fact little in common with what is happening on the ground. The activity of big logging companies, together with uncontrolled urbanization, have nearly completely destroyed the Mata Atlantica; vast areas of the Amazon forest disappear every year to the hands of commercial agriculture, cattle raising and industrial logging; indigenous peoples' lands are usurped by tree plantation companies (the struggle of the Tupinikim and Guarani against giant Aracruz Celulose in Espirito Santo is a paradigmatic example); most "protected areas" exist only on paper. And those who really want to protect the forests -since they constitute their vital space- are considered "invaders." The Pataxo have recovered their territory and this action implies a major step to ensure that in the future they will not be subjected to a life of misery and humiliation and will be finally able to live in dignity. But for this

to happen they now need support. We request all our friends to send letters of support for their plight addressed to CIMI-Equipe Extremo Sul.

Source: CIMI, 25/8/99.