

Seven thousand settlers have been evicted from former Indian lands, sending shockwaves through Brazil's powerful farm sector

Rough justice as Brazil tries to right past wrongs to Indians

BY CAROLINE STAUFFER
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CONVERSATION CLOSED: Chief Paridzané, who promised his father and grandfather he would reclaim their land, says the changes are irreversible.

REUTERS/PAULO WHITAKER

Damião Paridzané was nine years old in 1966 when the Brazilian Air Force loaded him and hundreds of other Xavante Indians onto a cargo plane.

The government, eager to open up the tribe's fertile slice of central Brazil to commercial agriculture, whisked them 250 miles (400 km) away to a new reservation. Paridzané says many friends died of measles, while others clashed with rival tribes who had been forced onto the same land.

Nearly a half century after their eviction, the Xavantes are back. Paridzané is now chief, resplendent in a headdress of bright green and blue feathers. These days

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Chief Damião Paridzané

it's the “white man” being forced to leave. As President Dilma Rousseff's government tries to redress past wrongs, it has evicted some 7,000 farmers and other settlers and turned their holdings into a reservation so that the Xavantes can return home.

“This is a traditional land,” said Chief

Paridzané. “It has nothing to do with white men, with ranchers, or with foreign companies.”

But this is no happy-ever-after story. Violent clashes have erupted. Farmers have contested the evictions before Brazil's Supreme Court. The town left behind by the ousted settlers has gone to ruin.

The conflict highlights the risks being run by an agricultural superpower whose leftist government is trying to sort out centuries of ethnic disputes over ownership of land from which much of the nation's wealth sprouts.

More than 100 years after the United

States mostly finished carving out its Indian reservations, Brazil is among a handful of countries in the Americas, including Colombia and Panama, that are still setting land aside. But the Rousseff government has gone a step further by evicting non-Indians from indigenous territory.

The amount of territory at issue in the Xavantes' case is relatively small – about the size of Greater London. And Brazil generally has a good track record of protecting the property rights of locals and foreigners. The government offered to resettle some, but not all, of the farmers. Yet the agricultural lobby fears the conservation of Indian lands could get more contentious as farmers and miners push deeper into the Amazon jungle, where some tribes have never had contact with the outside world.

Governments throughout Latin America have struggled to balance the acute need for economic development with the rights of an indigenous community that makes up about 10 percent of the region's population. In recent years that community has grown more effective at flexing its political muscle. In 2009, the Brazilian government cleared rice farmers and ranchers from an area 10 times as large as the Xavante reservation, 1.68 million hectares near the Venezuelan border, and gave it to Indians.

Clashes over land rights in Peru have left more than 100 people dead in recent years. Indigenous protests have delayed plans for mines and roads in Ecuador and Bolivia. Elsewhere in Brazil, protests by Amazon

Brazil's Indian reservations

Indian reservations



Source: FUNAI

tribes have delayed construction of one of Rousseff's pet projects, a huge hydroelectric complex known as Belo Monte, and drawn the attention of celebrities including "Avatar" director James Cameron.

Some see a circle closing as the Xavantes and their land return to a more primitive state. Seth Garfield, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin who wrote a book on the Xavantes, said the tribe was one of the few in the region that had no contact with Europeans prior to their eviction – making it particularly cruel.

"It's a fascinating culmination," Garfield said.

The settling of historical accounts, the farm lobby warns, will cost Brazil's

agricultural economy, which has emerged as one of the world's leading exporters. Gilmar Delosbel, regional director for soy cooperative Aprosoja, said the uncertainty created by the land disputes could make farmers think twice before pushing into new lands. That could, in turn, disrupt Brazil's goal of passing the United States to become the world's top soy producer.

"Producing regions need to be left to produce, to grow food for the world and generate wealth for Brazil," Delosbel said.

TEAR GAS AND RUBBER BULLETS

The amount of land at stake in Maraiwatsede, a stretch of verdant savannah near the edge of the Amazon about 375 miles northwest



See the video: <http://reut.rs/17nqPSs>



IN LIMBO: Cattle rancher Antonio Luiz Pereira was evicted from his home with his wife and three children. They are now living on cots in an outdoor school gymnasium, awaiting resettlement. **REUTERS/PAULO WHITAKER**

of Brasília, is about 165,000 hectares, a speck on the map of South America's largest country. Yet the events of the past six months have been dramatic enough to get the whole country's attention.

At the Xavantes' request, the government has bulldozed many of the houses, grain silos, schools and other traces of the farmers who controlled the area for the past 50 years.

Indians use rifles to hunt the cattle left behind by the departed ranchers, stripping the corpses for beef. Abandoned dogs roam the wooden and metal wreckage of buildings, and vultures hungrily pick over dead livestock.

A crude, hand-written sign announces the new Xavante name the Indians have given to the area's only town, "Mõõnîpa," replacing the Portuguese name: Posto da Mata.

At what used to be the gas station, four police officers stand guard against any renewed aggression by the evicted farmers, some of whom have taken up arms to try to get their old land back. A recent police video shows federal troops firing rubber bullets and tear gas at about 50 ranchers who were trying to stop the removal of people from their homes.

The spectacle of once-prosperous farms being reduced to rubble has horrified Brazil's agricultural lobby and its powerful allies in Brasília, who fear a fresh precedent is being set for land grabs elsewhere. But the effort to partially roll back the seizures of Indian lands has been decades in the making.

The current Brazilian constitution, written in 1988 shortly after the country emerged from a military dictatorship,

enshrined the Indians' right to "the lands they traditionally occupy," and said the state is responsible for "demarcating them, protecting and ensuring respect of their property."

Democratic governments have followed through, with some 13 percent of Brazil's territory now set aside for the 0.4 percent of the population considered indigenous. In comparison, just 2.3 percent of land in the continental United States is reserved for Indians, who make up 0.9 percent of the population.

Funai, the Brazilian government's indigenous affairs department, began putting together a proposal for a new reservation for the Xavante Indians in 1992, and its plan was approved in 1998.

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BRAZIL-INDIANS ROUGH JUSTICE IN THE AMAZON



A SIMPLER TIME: The Xavantes asked the government to destroy the village left behind by the evicted farmers, but not all trappings of modernity will be sacrificed. Children are taught Portuguese as well as the Xavante language, and most wear shorts and T-shirts except for celebrations and ceremonies.

REUTERS/PAULO WHITAKER





STANDING GUARD: The evictions sparked some violent clashes and Brazilian forces now guard the village to prevent renewed attacks. **REUTERS/PAULO WHITAKER**

The farm lobby, led by Katia Abreu, an influential senator, tried to block the evictions by challenging the boundaries of the indigenous territory. But the Supreme Court denied their final appeal in October, and Funai sent out notices giving all non-Indian “intruders” 30 days to vacate. The police and the army then moved in just before the new year to clear out any holdouts.

Cattle rancher Antonio Luiz Pereira and his young family now find themselves uprooted and homeless, somewhat like Chief Paridzané did five decades ago.

Pereira and his wife and three children now spend their nights on cots in a sweltering outdoor school gymnasium some 25 miles from their old home. Their belongings sit in boxes on the floor, gathering mildew.

“We had a nice house and a good life there - and we lost it all,” Pereira said, shaking his head.

Wealthier farmers mostly fled to larger cities to regroup, without monetary compensation. But some 270 farming families, including the Pereiras, are thought to be in

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a holding pattern after registering with the government and applying for resettlement. Of those, 105, mostly lower income families, are being moved to small plots of land nearby.

The Pereiras and others were offered land three hours away, but they say it is too dry and sandy to support livestock or crops, so they are holding out - tenuously - for a better offer. Others have taken action, setting up sporadic roadblocks in protests that led to fuel and food shortages in towns to the north. One mob burned a truck that was bound for Chief Paridzané’s village, bearing medicine and supplies.

Brazilians are now debating whether

the former settlers got a raw deal. Paulo Roberto de Azevedo Junior, coordinator for Funai’s regional office, says the farmers knew they were intruding on Indian territory, and property documents claiming otherwise are false.

But the Pereiras say they had no reason to doubt a homeowners’ certificate, which they showed to a reporter, that indicates they bought the ranch for about \$100,000 in 2005. Although the boundaries of the Indian reservation were approved as long ago as 1998, the farmers say they did not understand that would mean they would have to leave.

Senator Abreu, who is also president of Brazil’s Confederation of Agriculture and Livestock, says the real culprit is a lack of legal “clarity” - a common issue in a country that has had six constitutions in the last century.

The problem, farming groups say, is that Funai is evicting people from areas where local government officials encouraged settlement as recently as the late 1990s.

They also say Funai and other agencies have been too aggressive when deciding what constitutes ancestral land. Matters have been made more difficult by the nomadic nature of many tribes and the hostile geography of the Amazon, which makes mapping and setting boundaries difficult.

“Funai just wants to keep making more reserves in areas the Indians have no claim to,” said Delosbel, regional director of the soy cooperative. “Obviously we want them to live well ... but enough is enough.”

Chief Paridzané, who promised his father and grandfather he would win their territory back, says the changes are irreversible. He says he will refuse requests by farmers to rent back their old land, or any attempts by the government to pave a road that could slash the time it takes area farmers to get their goods to ports in Brazil’s northeast.

“Conversation closed,” he declared before an assembly of long-haired Xavante men, who bowed their heads in respect as he spoke. “We can’t have ranchers running after

LOOKING AHEAD: The Xavantes want to see the land around their village revert to the past when it was worthy of the name Marãiwatsédé – a Xavante word for “thick, dangerous forest.”

REUTERS/PAULO WHITAKER

the chief and asking about these things.”

The Xavantes have radically different ideas about agriculture and development. They want to see the area again become worthy of the name Marãiwatsédé – a Xavante word for “thick, dangerous forest.” That means letting the hated soy farms and cattle ranches grow fallow, in hopes the trees will sprout again.

Still, not all trappings of modernity will be sacrificed – it’s too late for that.

While the Xavantes still don ceremonial dress and paint for celebrations and ceremonies, most wear shorts and T-shirts most of the time. Children ask outside visitors for soft drinks. The main village has a Catholic church and a school with classes in the Xavante language as well as in Portuguese – which Chief Paridzané admits is important for children to learn.

Non-profit groups have helped build

houses that look like huts, but stand up better to the elements. And the tribe will continue to depend on the government for security.

Indigenous-affairs agency Funai is trying to encourage the tribe to become economically self-sufficient, in part by producing organic corn and soy crops that could be marketed under a fair-trade Marãiwatsédé brand. The agency also plans to bring 4,000 more Xavantes from other reservations to make the settlement viable, and hopes to eventually stop giving out basic food.

“We can’t keep doing that. They can’t be so dependent – it’s patronizing,” said Azevedo Junior, the Funai coordinator.

The farmers fear they haven’t seen the end of the fallout from Marãiwatsédé. Their latest concern: The reservation is now harboring Asian rust fungus, a dreaded disease that damages leaves and rapidly kills soy plants. Soy lobby Aprosoja says some of the 3,000

hectares of abandoned soy fields are now festering with the fungus – putting 341,000 hectares of surrounding farms at risk.

“Thousands were kicked out of an area that had been planted, we’re very concerned about the sanitary situation,” said Eduardo Godoi, a manager at Mato Grosso state’s powerful farming and ranching federation, Famato. “Marãiwatsédé is a lost battle.”

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