Brazilian Indian leader who died fighting for his people's rights

Chief Marcos Verón

The Guardian 28/1/03

The Brazilian Indian chief Marcos Verón has died at the age of around 75 after being violently evicted from a cattle ranch in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, not far from the frontier with Paraguay.

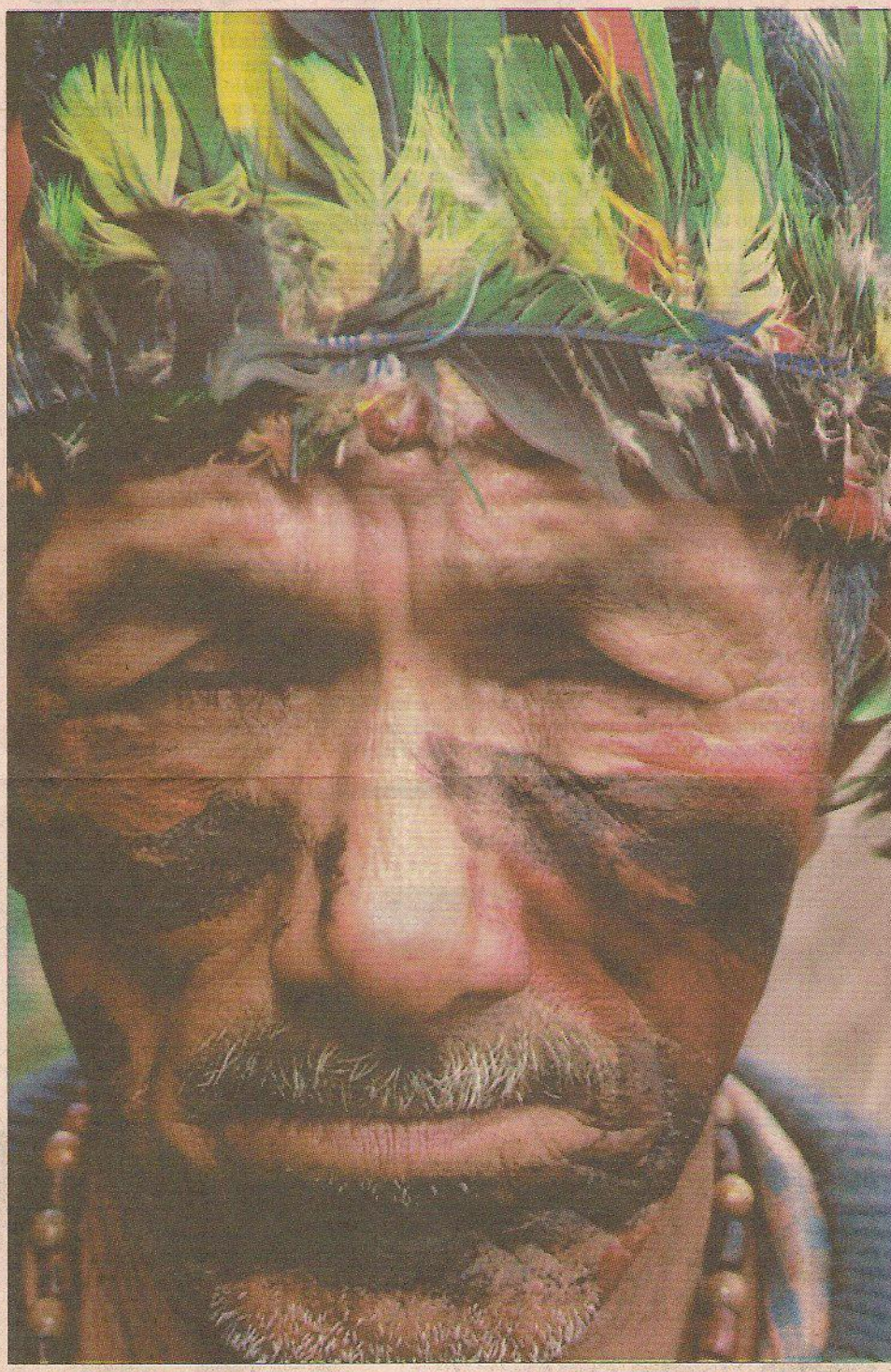
On January 11, Marcos, a Guarani-Kaiowá Indian, led a group of about 100 Indians in a *retomada* (or retaking) of traditional indigenous land, now occupied by the Brasília do Sul ranch. The following day, the rancher sent in gunmen to reclaim the ranch. Marcos was severely beaten and left unconscious by the roadside, apparently with a fractured skull. His nephew, Reginaldo Verón, was shot and injured.

Today, there are about 9,000 Guarani-Kaoiwá Indians camped beside the roads in Mato Grosso do Sul, waiting for land. Many of the remaining 23,000 villagers are undernourished because of a shortage of land to plant with crops. Suicide rates are on the increase. Last year, 53 Indians killed themselves, compared with 42 in 2001; more than half these deaths were of people under 20 years of age. Without land to work, and facing racial prejudice in Brazil's cities, the Indians become depressed, and some turn to alcohol.

Verón played a key role in his group's efforts to regain their land. In 1998, he led the first *retomada* of the 8,000 hectares in the Brasília do Sul ranch. At first, it seemed the Indians had been successful, but then the rancher won his appeal in the courts, which frequently side with property-owners in such disputes.

In November 2000, Verón visited Europe to win support for the struggle. A short, stocky figure, incongruously wearing his Indian headband above thick sweaters to protect him from the London weather, he told a packed meeting, organised by Survival International: "All the Indians in my group are suffering because our lands have not been demarcated. We are living in misery and poverty. Our land is our life, our soul; without it we die."

He related the story of one of his own sons, who had been forced to leave his wife and children to work in a ranch to earn money for food. After a month, the son was sacked by the ranch-owner, who also refused to pay him for the work he had done. "I followed [my son] through the forest, and arrived just in time to cut the rope from the branch of the tree where he was trying to hang himself," said Verón.



Verón . . . 'We are living in misery. Our land is our life, our soul; without it we die' Photograph: J Ripper/Survival

For more than a year now, the Brazilian Indians have been told that they will shortly be given their land, for an anthropological investigation has backed their claim to be the original inhabitants. Under the constitution, this means that the cattle rancher must be expropriated and the land returned to the Indians.

The Indians, however, have learned from experience that their claims are often more quickly resolved if they back them up with direct action. They are determined to prove that Verón did not die in vain. They insisted on burying his body in their traditional burial site on the ranch, and were given police protection to prevent further violence. The Indians are now refusing to leave the area, and are demanding the immediate expropriation of the ranch.

Sue Branford

Marcos Verón, campaigner for Indian rights, born c1928; died January 13 2003