

Brazil's Indians trampled by the global sugar rush

It is the dark side of the World Cup host nation: tribal people being killed or forced off their land to feed our sweet tooth

Christina Lamb Published: 22 June 2014



Damiana Cavanha has lost her husband, two sons and a grandson to accidents she blames on the sugar industry

IN BRAZIL'S booming agricultural state of Mato Grosso do Sul it used to be said that the life of an Indian was not worth a cow. Now, though, it seems it is not even worth a traffic sign.

That is what a local public prosecutor asked for after a grandmother from the Guarani tribe, Damiana Cavanha, lost her husband, two sons and four-year-old grandson, all of them in hit-and-run accidents.

"Indians count for nothing in this state," said Marco Antonio Delfino, the state prosecutor, in exasperation. "All that matters is producing beef, soy and sugar for export."

Over the past century the Guarani, who used to roam across the southwestern state, have been herded into small reservations as farmers take over their ancestral lands to farm. But in recent years the conflict has become more violent as worldwide demand for food has made the land more valuable — while the Indians

have led their own fight to retake it. Hundreds of Indians have been killed and tortured and many others hang themselves from trees in desperation.

A slight figure in wellington boots, Damiana, 65, crouches in front of five wooden crosses and begins to chant. The four family members she has lost in the past 14 years were killed, she alleges, by the farmer who has taken her land, or by the sugar-mill he supplies.

The fifth grave is that of their shaman who, she said, died after drinking water contaminated by farm pesticides.

The deaths have left Damiana as chief of her community. The patch of land where she and 21 other Guarani live is cramped and miserable. Their shacks are fashioned from poles and plastic sheeting that lets in rain and rats. A mangy dog wanders through the ground, which is littered with corn husks and old bicycle tyres. All around what was once their lands are fields of lush green sugar cane, grown by the farmer, who claims Damiana's community are squatters.

These Guarani could not look less like the happy, smiling Indian on Coca-Cola posters that read: "World Cup for everyone". Yet it is the rush for sugar to supply firms such as Coca-Cola, a lead sponsor of the World Cup, that many blame for the violence decimating Brazil's largest tribe.

Three times in the past 15 years Damiana's community has been violently forced off its land by gunmen who set fire to their huts. "We lost everything and were forced to live on the side of the highway — where we can't grow anything — and had to beg," she said.

They have returned four times in what are known as "retomadas" (literally, retakings) — most recently in September.

"They threaten us all the time," she said. "But this is our land, where the ancestors are buried, and I'm never leaving. We'll die rather than leave."

After Damiana's husband and two of her sons were run over, Delfino went to court to ask for a road sign by their encampment to warn motorists to slow down, but the court refused. "Indians in this state are not even worth a traffic sign," he said.

Indians are still being killed for their land. Two weeks ago, not far from Damiana's patch, another Indian was killed in a place called Guyra Kambi'y.

Ivo Carvalinda, 61, went out to get firewood and never came back. His body was found early the next morning face down with a bullet hole under his right ear and in his eye socket. His daughter Parecida has no doubt about what happened: "He was killed by the farmer who took our land," she said.



The Coca-Cola advertisements seem to have disappeared since Survival International issued

still live in the reservations, which are desperate places with high levels of violence, alcoholism, drug use and suicide.

A shocking study by the Indigenous Missionary Council of the Catholic Church (CIMI) found that at least 72 Guarani committed suicide last year — the world's highest suicide rate — the majority of victims aged from 15 to 30 — and that this year a 13-year-old girl hanged herself in April.

"They see only hunger, misery, threats and lack of space, and don't see any way out," explained Tonico Benites, a Guarani who is professor of anthropology at the Federal University of Greater Dourados. "They enter what we call 'nhumyuro' — a state of profound sadness."

Although tens of thousands of acres have been recognised as Indian land by government authorities, hardly any has been handed over. Many Guarani, like Damiana, have taken things into their own hands, carrying out their own "retomadas" to take some of it back.

But they have none of the political power of the farmers. One of the state's leading sugar growers is Jose Teixeira, a powerful congressman. "I bought my land in 1968 from another farmer who had had it since 1924," he said.

"Everyone knows Indians were the only inhabitants when Cabral [the explorer who discovered Brazil] came, but the country has since passed through various stages of development, and you can't just transform private property into public by a decree."

He organised a flight over the land to contrast the neat green fields of sugar cane with the muddy settlements of the Indians. "You see, Indians don't do productive activities," he said afterwards.

A recent report by Oxfam, titled Sugar Rush, on how the world's demand for sugar is "fuelling land grabs and decimating indigenous communities", cited the Guarani village of Jaytavary. Farmers there continue to grow sugar on land the government has officially recognised as belonging to the Indians, but which has not been handed over.

In a clearing under a big tree, women squat peeling yams. One of them is Angela Rodrigues, the village shaman. She begins to dance on the bare red earth and chant about their 30-year struggle for the land of their ancestors.

"We were born here," said her brother Alindo, 45. "But a farmer came in 1994, sent us all to a reserve and shot dead six who tried to resist."



Companies that process sugar are being urged not to buy it from farmers who have seized Indian land

It is a far cry from the image the authorities are trying to promote during the World Cup. Indians and environmental activists say no government in recent Brazilian history has been so bad for them.

The head of the Indian protection agency quit last year and some of its staff wrote a letter to President Dilma Rousseff complaining that her government has designated less land to tribal groups than any other government for 25 years.

"It's a very bleak scenario," said Fiona Watson, the campaign director for Survival International. "All the gains of that whole fight for the Amazon of the 1980s and 1990s are being reversed, and football fans won't see this."

Few are in a more desperate situation than the Guarani people, who lost most of their land when the forest was turned first into cattle ranching, and subsequently soya and sugar cane plantations. Like Damiana, the Indians who had always lived there were transported away on trucks and corralled into reservations to be used as cheap labour.

Most of the 43,000 Guarani in Mato Grosso do Sul

They moved back in 1999, but ever since have been constantly intimidated by farmers, who have fired shots and sent bulldozers in. Even so, more have returned; today about 300 Guarani live on a small plot of land surrounded by sugar-cane fields.

They live under constant intimidation. "We can't hunt to bring meat for our children," said Alindo. "My brother-in-law went to hunt wild pig near the plantation and the fazendeiro [planter] said, 'If you come here, I'll cut you in pieces and throw you in the river.'"

The community has written a letter to Coca-Cola on paper decorated with hearts, asking it to stop buying sugar from Bunge, the American-owned company that processes the local sugar. "We want Coca-Cola to stand beside us and feel our pain and suffering, because the sugar cane is destroying any hope of a future for our children," it said.

In a statement, Coca-Cola confirmed that it is buying sugar from Bunge but that "it is not sourced from the Monteverde mill and has not been mixed with sugar from it".

"At the Coca Cola company we believe land-grabbing is unacceptable and we are implementing a zero-tolerance approach to it throughout our supply chain," it added.

A spokeswoman for Bunge insisted: "The lands in question have not yet been affirmed as indigenous by the government, and the farmers from

6/23/2014

Brazil's Indians trampled by the global sugar rush | The Sunday Times

whom we source sugar-cane grown on these lands are the legal owners and have been for decades.” But she did add: “Bunge’s approach is rooted in legal compliance and due process; we honour our contracts.

“That said, when these contracts expire at the end of the current harvest, we’re not obligated to renew them, and will not.”

The Coca-Cola advertisements seem to have disappeared since Survival International issued spoof ads declaring: “Welcome to the dark side of Brazil,” and demanding: “Let the Guarani Live!”

“If swift action is not taken to return their land, many more Guarani will suffer death at the hands of the ranchers’ gunmen and take their own lives in despair,” said Survival’s Fiona Watson. “Is it too much to expect the Brazilian authorities — given the billions they’re spending on the World Cup — to sort this out?”

[@christinalamb](#)