



## THE SITUATION OF THE AWA GUAJÁ, MARANHÃO, BRAZIL

### Introduction

The Awa Guajá are one of the last purely nomadic hunter gatherers in Brazil. Their total population is estimated at 300, half of whom have had no contact with national society. It is thought they numbered 1,500 in 1900 and 800 - 1,000 in 1950. Living in small mobile groups of anything between one to seven families, they are scattered over a large area of Maranhao State. They rely entirely on hunting and gathering for their survival and thus need to occupy extensive areas of forest. Of great value is the babaçu palm - the Awa Guajá eat its nuts and use the leaves for making shelters as well as its fibres for skirts and baby slings.

Their territory consists mainly of the oldest forest in Brazil known as pre-Amazon forest. Much of this unique and species-rich environment is steadily disappearing due to logging, colonisation schemes, mining and large scale development projects which form part of the Great Carajás Project.

The Awa Guajá refer to themselves as 'Awa' which means people. Speaking Tupi-Guarani, it is likely that five hundred years ago they were part of a much larger grouping of indigenous peoples such as the Parakaná, Assurini and Urubu Kaapor. As the Portuguese penetrated the lower Amazon region, so the indigenous inhabitants split up into smaller groups and migrated over large areas.

It is thought that last century the Awa Guajá may have been an agricultural people, who were forced to abandon agriculture for an entirely nomadic life due to the increasing incursions and pressure by white people on their land. Their presence in Maranhão was first recorded in 1853. Now they tend to occupy areas of difficult access such as the headwaters of small rivers, living under simple shelters of palm leaves which are easily built and abandoned.

## The Expanding Frontier

In the 1950s many indigenous peoples in the area were fighting to keep their land. Pressure on the Awa came from other Indian tribes such as the Urubu Kaapor and Guajajara as well as the rapidly expanding frontier. As white people penetrated the forest the small Awa groups were very vulnerable to attack. The Brazilian Government's Indian Protection Service (SPI) had sporadic contact in the 1960s though these were usually devastating for the Awa as they quickly succumbed to diseases introduced by the white people.

Reports from this time show that even then the Awa were victims of planned massacres by people living in towns and settlements which were mushrooming in the area. One account by a man who worked on the construction of the BR 222 road which links Santa Inês to Imperatriz reported that construction teams killed 50 Awa in the beginning of the 1970s. During this period some autonomous Awa bands were simply wiped out.

## Violence to the Awa

In the 1970s the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) started to contact more Awa groups and as a result, many died of diseases such as flu, malaria and pneumonia. As pressure on their lands intensified and the destruction of their forests by large landowners and settlers increased, throughout the 1970s and 1980s many Awa bands were severely reduced or massacred outright.

In one well documented case, in April 1978 some farmworkers fired on a group of Awa Guajá who appeared near their farm. Five Indians were killed and a boy taken prisoner. Several escaped including one man, Karapiru and a little girl, who soon died. Karapiru lived on his own for ten years before he was discovered in 1988 wandering in Bahia, 600 kilometres from his territory in enforced solitude.

Similar stories abound - in 1985 a group of Awa were machine-gunned by the Military Police of Unaí who mistook them for cattle thieves.

In 1989 three different groups of uncontacted Awa (numbering 39 people in total) were found wandering around the vicinity of the Carajás Railway. One group consisted of two women and their children. Unable to find out who they were, the local FUNAI official concluded "They are frightened and have fled from something, probably a direct attack by someone - something very common in this area which is infested with invasions of indigenous areas - or they are fleeing from a contagious disease". Later it was discovered that their husbands had died from disease contracted from loggers or farmers.

In March 1990 an Awa boy was found on his own near the town of João Pinheiro, Minas Gerais and 'captured' by the military police. He had lived in his shelter for a year near a farm.

In July 1992, during a visit to the Awa Guajá, a member of Survival International met an Awa Guajá couple and their new born baby who had been contacted for the first time a week earlier. Traumatized and unable to speak they waited in fear to be moved to a village set up by FUNAI for contacted Awa. Later it became known that they were the only survivors of a massacre by landowners which had occurred some years ago - the rest of their group had been murdered and the couple had fled into the forest where they lived on their own. Scars on their bodies testified to this violence.

On other occasions FUNAI employees have found piles of Awa bones, a mute testimony to the mounting aggression and violence against the Indians.

Due to the increasing climate of tension between the Awa and outsiders invading their land there have been several conflicts where the Awa have been forced to defend themselves. For example in 1991 they killed a settler whose son had been fishing on Awa land.

#### FUNAI's Contact Programme

FUNAI's 1970s policy of contacting the Awa and transferring groups to a small reserve and forcing them to settle proved disastrous - many Indians succumbed to introduced diseases. In 1976 three autonomous groups were contacted totaling 91 people. By the beginning of 1980 only 25 had survived the ravages of disease and the vaccination programme.

Under its current President, FUNAI has abandoned its former policy of contacting isolated Indians aware of the trauma and dangers of enforced contact. Contact is only made if the Indians are in danger. Survival was recently told by a local FUNAI official "If we do not contact the Awa Guajá now, they will not survive. We only contact isolated Indians as a last resort." This clearly illustrates the desperate situation of those uncontacted Awa groups who are at the mercy of invading loggers, miners and landowners. With a small population leading a highly nomadic lifestyle and decreasing availability of land and resources the Awa are one of the most threatened tribal peoples in Brazil today.

FUNAI currently has three Indigenous Posts where the contacted Awa are encouraged to settle and adopt a semi-nomadic/agricultural lifestyle: 1) the Awa Post with 84 Indians contacted in 1980; 2) Guajá Post with 47 Indians most of whom were contacted in 1973; 3) Juriti Post with 18 Indians contacted in 1988.

In 1992 twenty eight FUNAI staff were working on the programme which included staff occupying vigilance posts to deter invasions onto Awa land, and mobile teams trying to make contact with nomadic Awa Guajá groups. There were also two medical attendants. Considering the enormity of the area and the grave threat to the Awa, the head of the contact team informed Survival that more people were desperately needed to

patrol the area - he can only ever rely about 25 people when in reality 40 are needed.

### Carajás Project

The World Bank stipulated that as a condition of its US \$300 million loan to Brazil for the development of the Greater Carajás Project, all indigenous areas should be demarcated thereby giving them legal protection. Equally this was a condition of the EEC's \$600 million investment in the Project. Over a decade later this condition continues to be flouted and both the Awa Guajá and Krikati people are paying the price.

Companhia Vale do Rio Doce (CVRD) the state mining company which controls the Carajás Iron Ore Project established an accord with FUNAI (059/82) to provide a support programme for the indigenous peoples of the area. Land demarcations were to be the responsibility of FUNAI. However the alliance of FUNAI and the CVRD throughout the 1980s conspired not to uphold Indian land rights but to integrate the indigenous population into national society "The Indians will reach a degree of acculturation sufficient for them to be assimilated as workers on the Project" (Executive-Secretary of Inter-Ministerial Council which oversees the Greater Carajás Project).

With relation to the Awa, no mention was made in the support programme of demarcating land specifically for them. However, in a letter dated 14 September 1990 to Survival International from the Head of FUNAI's Isolated Indians Unit, who is now the President of FUNAI, he clearly states "As for the Guajá indigenous group, resources exist for the demarcation of the their lands - these are with CVRD (Companhia Vale do Rio Doce - which is a state company). This money comes from the agreement with the World Bank. FUNAI must speed up the legal process so that later the land will be demarcated. CVRD wants to finish its responsibilities when the demarcation is finished, which is not the correct procedure, considering that we have at least three uncontacted groups living outside the area which will be delimited."

### Land rights

Under article 231 of the Brazilian Constitution, indigenous peoples have "the original right to inhabit lands which they have traditionally occupied".

Defying its own Constitution and the recommendations of anthropologists and non-governmental organisations in Brazil, the Brazilian Government has systematically reduced the size of the Awa Indigenous Area and delayed its demarcation. Recognition and protection of this area is vital as it acts as a corridor linking the Indigenous Areas of Alto Turiacu to the Carú Indigenous Area and the Gurupi Biological Reserve, all of which are inhabited by the Awa. Already a dirt road cuts the Awa area from east to west.

Encouraged by Government stalling and lack of demarcation, squatters have flooded into the south and southeast of the reserve. Colonists living along the Carajás Railway which cuts along the southern boundary of the Awa reserve regularly invade the area to hunt and fish.

Local timber merchants are removing wood destined for the hundreds of sawmills which proliferate in the towns of Paragominas and Açailândia. Wood is also used for charcoal to fire the pig iron furnaces of the region, particularly in Imperatriz and Açailândia, as part of the Carajás Project. One scientist from the Emílio Goeldi Museum believes that the pressure is such that the forest will be finished in five years.

Political influence wielded by powerful families in Maranhão and friends of former President Sarney have also consistently lobbied against demarcation. Mining companies have applied for permits to explore for bauxite deposits in the southwest part of Awa Guajá territory which encompasses part of the Carú Indigenous Area and the Gurupi Biological Reserve where there are uncontacted Awa Guajá.

In September 1985 a Government working group recommended that 276,000 hectares be demarcated as a reserve for the Awa - this was never carried out. Instead, in March 1988 former President Sarney created the Gurupi Biological Reserve with 341,650 hectares (decree no. 95614) which is inhabited by uncontacted Awa. No mention was made of the Indians. According to FUNAI personnel much of the forest has been invaded and destroyed by loggers and farmers.

In May 1988 through a decree (Portaria Interministerial no. 76) 147,000 hectares was declared to be of permanent possession of the Awa people and to be demarcated by FUNAI. Powerful forces, in the form of 36 cattle ranchers who claimed 111,000 hectares of Awa land opposed this so that on 8 September decree no 158 reduced the Awa area by 60% to a mere 65,000 hectares.

In June 1992 a FUNAI working group restudied the question and recommended that 118,000 hectares be demarcated. On 27 July in Decree 373 the Minister of Justice declared the area to be of permanent possession of the Awa and authorised the demarcation.

CVRD has consistently blocked the \$US 600,000 which it holds from the World Bank for the demarcation of both the Awa and Krikati reserves.

#### Companies on Awa Guajá land

The Carajás Railway which cuts the south boundary of Awa Guajá land has fueled intensive poaching and squatting on Awa land. In the words of a Brazilian anthropologist who worked with the Awa Guajá " The Great Carajás Programme, with its Railway... attracted not only large scale cattle ranches which disenfranchised thousands of settlers around indigenous

areas, but it also gave incentives to establish pig iron smelters which use wood charcoal for energy."

The owners of the Agropecuaria Alto Turiaçu have been one of the biggest obstacles to demarcation of the Awa Indigenous Area. This cattle ranch of 120,000 hectares lies within the northern part of the Awa Indigenous Area. The same people are also amongst the biggest exporters of wood in the area.

There are reports that a group of Awa Guajá who live in the Arariboia Indigenous Area have been constantly harassed by groups of Guajajara Indians and settlers collecting the leaves of the Jaborandi tree to sell to the local representatives of Merck Laboratories.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

In the words of a local NGO representative who has worked in with Indian tribes in the Carajás area for over a decade "The progressive and massive occupation of hundreds and hundreds of hectares of Awa Guajá territory is provoking a tragic bewilderment in the Indians socio-cultural structure. The occupation and reduction of their original territory by invaders is provoking constant friction even between nomadic Awa Guajá groups themselves. This is the tragic consequence of a socio-economic situation which is degenerating every day and which is opening the way for brutal violence: genocide, the destruction of the environment particularly the fast disappearing pre-Amazon forest with ecosystems which are unique in this world."

If all Awa Guajá territory is not demarcated urgently and properly protected, the last nomadic hunter gatherers in Brazil will simply disappear.

Survival International calls upon the Brazilian Government to implement a long term comprehensive programme which guarantees the Awa Guajá their full rights and which actively tries to involve them in deciding their future and protecting their lands.

1. to uphold and guarantee the Awa Guajá's lands rights conforming to article 231 of its own Constitution.
2. to demarcate all the Area Indígena Awa as a matter of urgency
3. to uphold the CVRD/FUNAI agreement which provides funds for the demarcation of Awa Guajá and Krikati land and for FUNAI's attraction and vigilance team.
4. to guarantee the survival of the uncontacted Awa and protect their land from invasion by creating a comprehensive network of vigilance posts and to finance these adequately.
5. to remove all settlers and farmers living illegally within Awa Guajá territory.

6. to compensate the Awa Guajá people for loss of and damage to their territory.

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