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EarthBeat



Indigenous people march with a placard that says "Brazil Indigenous Land" as they mark the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples in São Paulo Aug. 9, 2022. The Brazilian bishops' Indigenous Missionary Council said record violence the prior year against traditional peoples may have made 2021 "the worst year of the century" for Indigenous peoples. (CNS/Amanda Perobelli, Reuters)



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The number of conflicts over land, water or forest territories grew in Brazil in 2023, reaching 2,203 cases and impacting more than 950,000 people, according to the bishops' conference's Land Pastoral Commission.

Those have been the highest figures in the history of the report produced every year since 1985 by the commission, known by the Portuguese acronym CPT. In 2022, the commission identified 2,050 conflicts, with 923,000 people affected by them.

In the South American country, most lands used to be owned by the Empire of Brazil till the end of the 19th century. With the republic (declared in 1889), vast territories became public lands, usually informally occupied by peasants, Indigenous groups and other traditional peoples.

The country has failed to promote an encompassing land reform program, and many public territories ended up being stolen by big landowners who produced false deeds and claimed their ownership.

Such land grabbers are known in Portuguese as “grileiros,” a word that comes from “grilo,” cricket. They used to put a cricket inside a box with the fraudulent deed in order to make it look older, with the stains and marks the cricket would make on the document while sitting in the box for a few days. The grileiros oftentimes expelled the original occupants of such lands with violence.

Traditional communities and small growers have been struggling for their territories over the past decades, finding support in the constitution promulgated in 1988. The document determined that all Indigenous peoples should be officially granted their lands within five years — something that has not been done — and established several rules for the government's land reform program.

With the failure of subsequent administrations to serve those communities, disputes over land, water and forests have grown more and more over the years. During the former President Jair Bolsonaro's administration (2019-2022), such problems were greatly intensified with his support for grileiros and other land invaders and his decision not to grant lands to traditional peoples and landless workers.

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva pledged during the presidential campaign in 2022 that he would ensure the Indigenous peoples' rights and support landless workers. But his tenure's first year has been disappointing for many, including for CPT agents.

The number of deaths that occurred in 2023 as a result of land disputes — 31 — has decreased in comparison to 2022, when 47 people were killed. The total territory in dispute in Brazil fell by 26.8% between 2022 and 2023, and now corresponds to about 134,000 acres. But all other figures were negative.

"The current administration has been open to dialogue with us and has taken important measures, like removing many invaders from the Yanomami territory last year. But it's not enough, it's not what we expected," Ronilson Costa, one of the CPT's coordinators, told OSV News.

Indigenous people are at the top of the list of people who are victims of violence related to land disputes, the report said. The Yanomami are the largest relatively isolated tribe in South America. They live in the rainforests and mountains of northern Brazil and southern Venezuela.

Costa said that grileiros keep stealing public lands and the government has been failing to act. At the same time, Lula's administration has been rewarding agribusiness with economic incentives and political power, especially the segment that produces and exports commodities, to the detriment of small growers and traditional communities.

"Those are the groups who produce food for the Brazilian people and who protect

the country's biodiversity," Costa said.

Many state governors and Congress members are aligned with big landowners and the agribusiness as well, he added.

"Conflicts will keep emerging while that situation continues," Costa said.

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Spanish-born lay missionary Luis Ventura, executive secretary of the Brazilian bishops' conference's Indigenous Missionary Council, told OSV News that the current administration has failed to grant lands to Indigenous peoples with the necessary urgency, something that has intensified harassment and threats they suffer. Since 2023, only two territories have been demarcated, among dozens of cases that wait for Lula's decision.

"A movement called Zero Invasion, formed by grileiros, big farmers and even policemen, has been menacing and attacking several Indigenous communities that are struggling for their lands. That's the result of the government's inaction," Ventura said.

Death threats, aggressions and attacks on the houses of members of targeted communities are constant in Brazil. In 2023, at least 172 people were assaulted and 218 received death threats. The number of incidents involving the destruction of houses reached 2,741 cases.

Lincoln Fernandes de Lima, who heads an association of rubber tappers and Brazil nut collectors in the Amazonian state of Rondônia, has faced many of such problems.

He's part of a group of traditional occupiers of an area of rainforest which became a natural reservation in 1996. About 50 families were allowed back then to remain in the territory and keep working with the extraction of latex and nuts.

"But over the years grileiros began to invade and devastate large areas. The government has never acted against them," he told OSV News.

Today, only 10% of the original rainforest still exists. The rest became farming land.

The farmers would send hitmen to terrorize the original occupiers, burn their houses and kill those who resisted forced removal. De Lima had to leave his home behind in September, after receiving threats.

"Given that they destroyed everything, they now came for the last areas with wood. They're ready to devastate all that is left," he lamented.

De Lima said that there are powerful politicians and judges among those farmers, something that led the authorities to remain inactive. His community hoped that President Lula could somehow change the scenario, despite the fact that it's a state reservation.

"But we continue to be abandoned. We're not sure if Lula doesn't know what's happening here or if he's deliberately failing to take action," he concluded.