The Awá: On the Brink of Extinction

INTRODUCTION

The Awá people, also referred to as Guajá, live in the rainforest of the state of Maranhão, in the east of Brazil. They are an approximate 450-member tribe including about 100 individuals who still live in complete isolation. The Awá are nomad hunter-gatherers whose language is part of the Tupi-Guaraní family. The Awá group is made up by three partially isolated villages named Awá, Guajá and Juriti, and is characterized by having a young population, in which 47.6% is less than 14 years old. Since the early 1970s, the tribe has been persecuted and pushed out from their traditional lands by the Brazilian government and more extensively by extractive operations since the 1980s.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Originally living in settlements, the Awá adopted a nomadic lifestyle following the first European incursions in the region. During the 19th century, most of the forests from their land were cleared by settlers. From the mid-80s onward, some Awá moved to government-established settlements, where most of the time they were able to maintain their traditional way of life, living entirely off the forest, in nomadic groups of a few dozen people, with little or no contact with the outside world.

Since the early 1970s the Awá have been suffering the consequences of deforestation as well as harassment from peasants and illegal loggers. In fact, as of 1973, the Brazilian government, through its FUNAI agency (Fundação Nacional do Índio, the National Indian Foundation), started removing the Awá from their traditional lands and relocating them to legally demarcated reservations. FUNAI employees in charge of protecting the Awá live in each of those areas in so-called Indigenous outposts (posto indígena, or PI). Close to 315 Awá currently live in four of these PI enclaves (Guajá, Awá, Tiracambú, and Juriti) and a further 20 to 25% are still living in isolation in nearby areas.

The Carajas mining project, launched in 1980 and covering an area of 900 000 km², marked the beginning of a new destructive era for the forests on Awá land. The Brazilian government and the World Bank supported the mining juggernaut Vale in building a 900km railway to enable iron ore to be transported to the coast for exportation.

In 1982, the government of Brazil was granted a loan of 9 million USD from the World Bank and the European Union with several conditions, amongst which the demarcation and protection of indigenous peoples’ lands. However, the demarcation process was blocked largely by politicians and businessmen, some of whom have large landholdings on Awá land. Brazil only took action in March 2003 after a 20-year campaign led by international organizations such as Survival International and supported by local NGO CIMI (Indigenous Missionary Council). The long and powerful campaign involved publications of leaflets and other multimedia materials addressing the general public in order to raise awareness about the environmental struggle facing the Awá as well as drafting appeals to the United Nations and petitions to the Brazilian government urging for the demarcation process to be resumed. Over the years, Survival International generated a movement of Indigenous peoples in Brazil who themselves have taken root and given rise to dozens of Indigenous organizations lobbying vigorously for their own rights.
**INDIGENOUS RIGHTS IN BRAZIL**

The 1988 Brazilian constitution lays the ground for the acknowledgement and respect of its indigenous peoples. In fact, their right to social organization, customs, beliefs, languages and traditions are granted by law as well as their right to the land “they traditionally occupy”. The formal process of demarcation for these portions of land to be officially recognised by the State as Indigenous Territory (Terra Indígena [TI]) is the responsibility of FUNAI and requires an ethnographic and geographical survey of the area. The process is often delayed by legal disputes arising from the strong opposition of non-indigenous settlers defending their commercial interests in the TI. In 2002, the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169, a legally-binding international instrument which is designed to protect the rights of Indigenous and tribal peoples, was ratified by Brazil and enacted through a presidential decree in 2004. This cornerstone document introduced the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) from Indigenous peoples in policy and development processes that affect them (Art. 6). In 2007, this fundamental article on FPIC was re-affirmed by the draft of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the Brazilian authorities that same year. Although this international instrument has no legal power, it is a major step for the 148 signatory countries as it officially recognises the right to self-determination of their Indigenous population and puts emphasis on their collective rights more than individual rights. Finally, in March 2012, the Federal Judge Jirair Aram Meguerian ordered all outsiders illegally occupying the Awá Indigenous Territory in Maranhão to leave within twelve months. The decision was welcomed by indigenous communities. Nevertheless, the order was never enforced.

**ON THE VERGE OF EXTINCTION: ISSUES FACING THE AWÁ TRIBE**

Despite the different legal and non-legal instruments acknowledging indigenous peoples rights in Brazil, indigenous populations are still facing evictions from their traditional lands, violent repression from the national authorities and the violation of their FPIC in several mining projects. Relocation to the Indian outposts has had a dramatic impact on the organization of the Awá’s traditional way of life. They seek protection of FUNAI agents from settlers hunting them down, which leads them to stay permanently nearby the outpost. More than half of those who were contacted by FUNAI agents are estimated to have died as a result of diseases transmitted through contact itself. The slow process of demarcation exposes the Awá’s forests to increased invasion of outsiders and destruction of their land by logging and clearance for farming. Many cases of indigenous peoples being killed on sight by settlers have been reported. According to the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), a Catholic group, 450 Indigenous people were murdered in Brazil between 2003 and 2010. Moreover, even when Awá people find safety in the indigenous outposts, they are still not free to circulate as they wish for fear of being shot by loggers. Furthermore, the hunting conditions are more and more difficult since illegal loggers regularly invade their land at the start of the dry season, building roads and damming rivers, which scares away game and suspends the availability of fishing resources.

**CONCLUSION**

The future for Awá people is still uncertain. In July 2012, the Office of the Solicitor General issued Decree 303, and having force of law until Brazil’s Congress intervenes against it, allows military operations, construction of roads and hydro-electric dams, development of mining projects or any other activity deemed of a “strategic nature” on indigenous lands—all without the consent of impacted communities. In September 2012, FUNAI reported that loggers were penetrating deeper and deeper into Awá lands as they found evidence of deforestation only six kilometers away from Awá communities. As a result, the uncontacted members of the Awá tribe are always on the move in an ever shrinking forest. In June 2013, Brazil’s military launched a ground operation against illegal logging in Awá areas. FUNAI stated on 6 January 2014 that intruders will be given a 40-day notice to permanently leave Awá-Guajá lands.

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ABOUT UNPO

The UNPO is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organisation established in 1991. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and territories who have joined to protect and promote their human rights through nonviolent solutions.

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