

For traditional peoples in Brazil's Maranhão state, progress brings violence

by Ed Wilson Araújo on 9 June 2022 | Translated by Roberto Cataldo



- *Brazil's Maranhão state is home to Indigenous peoples and traditional Afro-Brazilian communities known as quilombos, who for generations have lived sustainably off the rich natural resources of the waterlogged Amazonian plains that make up this region.*
- *But tensions have escalated in recent years between these communities and outsiders, including agribusiness interests and infrastructure developers, who see opportunities for livestock ranching and power transmission lines on these vast plains.*
- *In 2017, in the ancestral lands of the Indigenous Akroá Gamella people, the conflict culminated in a violent attack blamed on agribusiness interests that left 22 community members injured, including two whose limbs were severed; today, the survivors live with serious psychological and physical scars.*
- *In the wetlands, the construction of electricity towers for transmission lines has been blamed for declining fish stocks,*

Aldeli de Jesus Ribeiro, also known as Pan Akroá Gamella, has scars all over his body as a result of gunshot wounds, stabbings, beatings with sticks and kicks suffered during the so-called Gamella Massacre. That violent attack took place on April 30, 2017, against the Indigenous people of Viana, a municipality in Brazil's Maranhão's state, located 214 kilometers (133 miles) from the state capital, São Luís.

Five years later, Ribeiro finds the strength to celebrate. "I was born again," he says, recalling the day he was shot in the back, had both his wrists and his left leg severed, got two deep cuts on his head, causing a deep slit on his forehead, in addition to a laceration on his mouth that resulted in the loss of five teeth.

By the shores of the lush Lake Aquiri in the village of Centro dos Antero, in his beautiful wooden house painted in tropical colors and surrounded by ornamental plants and fruit trees, Ribeiro celebrates his rebirth, which is expressed by his Indigenous name, Pan, which means "seed" in the Gamella language.

Another victim of the attack recalls that "the order was to kill everyone, even the children." José Ribamar Mendes Akroá Gamella, also known as Zé Canário, had his right hand and left leg severed, in addition to a cut on his face. He says he will never forget that day: "It was around 2 p.m., and we went out for a ritual. Men, women, children, everyone was at the Flores Lagoon when we were attacked. They were many, and they started shooting at us. They immediately surrounded me and cut off my arm with the machete we use to clear the land. They were going to cut my neck." After spending long periods in several hospitals and undergoing many surgeries to reattach their limbs, the two Gamella men bear many physical and psychological aftereffects. Their wrists and legs were reattached with platinum rods. Aldeli Ribeiro still manages to sweep the yard around his house and does farm work with the help of relatives. Zé Canário, though, has declared that "My life is over." He shows his stiff right hand and wrist, unable to perform basic movements, in addition to his fragile leg. He receives a pension that amounts to the minimum wage. He has eight children and counts on his wife's help for daily work on their small farm, for his personal hygiene, and for household care.



Aldeli de Jesus Ribeiro, also known as Pan Akroá Gamella. Image by Gui Christ.

Hunting, fishing and working on the farm, their main sources of livelihood, are no longer part of the daily lives of those who had their limbs severed. Ribeiro has seven children from several marriages and receives a monthly welfare allowance of 600 reais, about \$125. He has to juggle this money to maintain the house, help his family and buy

against red tape.

In addition to medical care, victims seek help through the traditional rituals that continue to be an important part of their culture.

Maria de Fátima Pereira, also known as Maria Roxa, is a shaman famous throughout the region for her spiritual and healing works through prayers, rituals, blessings, baths, medicines and advice.

"There are many sacred places here, our rivers, fields, lakes and forests, but the big farmers arrived and took everything, and now we are coming back to life," she says. "After the massacre, considering the conditions our relatives were in, it was a big mystery of God and the enchanted ones. It wasn't easy. They were given up for dead and they rose again because we are winners." The enchanted ones, she teaches, are the spiritual beings who inhabit sacred places and protect her people.

"At that moment, after the attack, with my arms severed, I crawled on my elbows and was incorporated by a spiritual enchanted one," Pan Akroá Gamella says.

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]



Shaman Maria de Fátima Pereira, known as Maria Roxa. Image by Gui Christ.

Structural violence

gunmen, land grabbers, evangelical leaders, city dwellers, merchants and Viana's local political elite.

During the incident on April 30, 2017, about 300 people armed with guns, sticks, stones and various types of knives, machetes, sickles and sharp objects attacked a small group of Indigenous people who were performing a ritual by the Flores Lagoon, at a place called Fragati in the village of Baías. The attack left 22 people wounded, two of them with their limbs cut off.

One of the names that comes up repeatedly in the survivors' accounts is that of Aluisio Mendes, the chair of the security committee in Brazil's lower house of congress, the Chamber of Deputies. The committee's vice chair is Daniel Silveira, sentenced to eight years and nine months in prison in 2021 for threatening justices from the Federal Supreme Court (STF) and other "attacks on democracy." He was later pardoned by President Jair Bolsonaro.

"Congressman Mendes played a significant role in that conflict, since he enables the claims of invaders in Congress, both big and small ones," says Kum'Tum Akroá Gamella, a member of the Akroá Gamella Leadership Council. "Together with merchants and evangelical church leaders, he makes decisions regarding our right to exist."

According to Kum'Tum, the attack was one of the outcomes of the violent process of colonization intended to "annihilate the bodies" of Indigenous people, to erase and deny their existence and their territories, spreading terror through a network of racial hatred.



Praw Akroá Gamella. In 2017, she saw a group of gunmen invade her family's land to attack the community. Image by Gui Christ.

Tensions had been building in Viana before the April 30, 2017, attack. Cars with loudspeakers went around town calling on the population to join a demonstration named "the March for Peace." On April 28, two days before the attack, a committee of residents participated in a program on

interested in taking the Indigenous Lands.

During the program, the interviewees left no doubt about their prejudice and hatred of the Indigenous population, and desire to see their identity erased. Throughout the broadcast, they insisted that no one had ever heard of the presence of Indigenous people in the area. They also referred to “people who call themselves Indigenous, invade places and tear down houses” as “a criminal faction ... vandals ... half a dozen crooks led by outsiders” and other remarks in that vein.

Mendes, the congressman, phoned in to the program and called the Gamella “pseudo-Indians.” He said he would be in Viana the following day to participate in the March for Peace. He also spoke about a congressional hearing with the then-minister of justice, Osmar Serraglio, in which he requested that Funai, the federal agency for Indigenous affairs, and the Federal Police take action to contain what was bound to be a tragedy.

“I call on the population not to take any violent measures at this point. I’ll see to it myself that all authorities do their jobs and solve this. Let’s settle it peacefully and orderly, and give peace and encouragement to this population that is now under threat. I’ll be there tomorrow in person. You can count on me,” Mendes told the Maracu AM listeners.

The following day, during the demonstration in the town of Santeiro, speaking on a stage decorated with banners and posters and facing a cheering crowd, Mendes was emphatic: “Well, nobody is meek and mild here, nobody will take this provocation anymore.” For the Gamella, those words were what triggered the conflict.

A native of Belo Horizonte in the state of Minas Gerais, Mendes previously worked as a lawyer, a Federal Police agent, and an aide to then-president José Sarney (1985-1990). He was also Maranhão’s state secretary of public security under the administration of then-governor Roseana Sarney (2010-2014). He was elected to the Chamber of Deputies Congress in 2014 with 3,493 votes in Viana — more than any other candidate in the state of Maranhão. He was reelected in 2018, a year after the Gamella attack, but only garnered 556 votes in the municipality that time around.



Lake Viana, the largest in Maranhão's lowlands. During floods, its waters overflow and spread fish over the surrounding fields, providing fishing opportunities. Image by Gui Christ.

The battle for demarcation

The rejection of the native peoples reflects the nature of the land disputes that have been going on here for at least 300 years, featuring farmers, businessmen and politicians from Viana and the neighboring municipalities of Penalva and Matinha. The Gamella have persisted in their attempts to get their territory officially recognized, or demarcated, arguing that their ancestors have lived here since the 18th century. From the 1960s onward, large tracts of the land were grabbed or traded under questionable circumstances, and the Indigenous territory was taken over by newcomers claiming to own it.

With little progress in their attempts to gain official recognition, the Akroá Gamella declared themselves an Indigenous people during an assembly held in 2014. They then started to reclaim the areas that had been illegally occupied or traded in dubious transactions.

In the rural part of Viana, about 450 Gamella families live in the Indigenous villages of Taquaritiua, Cajueiro-Piraí, Centro do Antero, Nova Vila, Tabocal, Ribeirão, Tabarelzinho, Claras, Prequeu, Pucu,



Cassava flour production in Taquaritiua, at the Akroá Gamella village. Image by Gui Christ.

After the 2017 attack, the Gamella occupied the state office of Funai, the Indigenous affairs agency, in São Luís, demanding more concrete measures to demarcate their territory. Funai set up a working group with several experts, but the process was stopped after Jair Bolsonaro was elected president in 2018.

Self-declaration of an Indigenous territory is supported under Brazil's 1988 Constitution, which guarantees Indigenous people's "original right" to their ancestral lands. Article 231 of the Constitution reads: "Indigenous people are recognized for their social organization, customs, languages, beliefs and traditions, and their original rights over the lands they traditionally occupy. It is incumbent upon the Federal Government to demarcate, protect and ensure respect for all their assets."

But a new battle for Indigenous ancestral rights looms on the horizon. On June 23 this year, Brazil's Federal Supreme Court (STF) will resume voting on a measure known as the *Marco Temporal*. This is a proposition advocated by the agribusiness caucus in Congress to deny territorial claims by Indigenous people if they were not living on the land by the cutoff date of Oct. 5, 1988 — the date the Constitution was promulgated.

lawyer and legal adviser to the Maranhão chapter of the Indigenist Missionary Council (CIMI), a Catholic Church-affiliated group that advocates for Indigenous rights. She says the Marco Temporal proposition aims to legalize the historical expropriation of indigenous territories and legitimize the countless frauds that benefited the invaders. "It means recognizing and supporting the violence used to exterminate entire peoples," Carvalho says.

While they continue to be denied formal territorial demarcation, the Akroá Gamella are building their ethnic identity by retaking land, making sustainable use of natural resources and cultivating their spiritual traditions. The ritual of Saint Belibeu is one of their ways to express how community member Demetriz Akroá Gamella sums up their beliefs: "Our feet are our scripture."

During the ritual, devotees give donations to the saint to show gratitude for the graces achieved throughout the year. But these offerings have to be "hunted" in the villages by "Belibeu's dogs" — Indigenous community members who roam the territory in a frantic search for the gifts, crossing fields, rivers, lakes and forests. Participants sweep the land to find donations in the most distant locations as a way to demarcate the territory with their feet.

"Celebrating the Belibeu ritual means reaffirming our existence as a people, our right to our territory, our plurality, our cultural diversity," says Indigenous council member Kum'Tum Akroá Gamella. "The ritual has a deep meaning that bears ancestral memory."

Sorrow is also part of the festivity. In the memories of the victims of that tragic day of April 30, 2017, invisible scars remain as a result of the impunity of those who ordered and perpetrated the violence.

Rafael Silva is a lawyer for the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), a Church-affiliated organization that advocates for land justice. He says there was no forensic analysis of the crime scene; the bullet casings were lost. "The absence of forensics was either a mistake or a deliberate decision," he says. The Public Prosecution Service demanded a Federal Police investigation into the situation. "What the Federal Police did was to use the investigation to criminalize the Gamella, first by denying their Indigenous identity in order to describe them not as an Indigenous people but as a gang, a criminal organization," Silva says.

The investigation is nearing completion.



Kum'Tum, a leader of the Akroá Gamella, and his mother, Maria do Carmo. Image by Gui Christ.

Marked to die

During pre-reporting for this story, another traditional leader was murdered in Maranhão. Edvaldo Pereira Rocha was shot eight times by two gunmen on the afternoon of April 29, 2022, in Jacarezinho, a quilombo, or community of descendants of self-liberated Afro-Brazilian slaves.

Jacarezinho is located in the municipality of São João do Sóter, in eastern Maranhão, 424 km (263 mi) from São Luís. The municipality has long been coveted by agribusiness, and as such has been the site of land conflicts for at least two decades. Constant threats and coercion against traditional communities have turned their leaders into targets by land grabbers and ranchers.

Killings, death threats, coercion, persecution and imprisonment of leaders of Indigenous and traditional peoples and communities are rife throughout the state.

According to the report "Land Conflicts Brazil 2020 (<https://www.cptnacional.org.br/downlods/download/5-assassinatos/14220-assassinatos-2020>)," produced by the Pastoral Land Commission's Dom Tomás Balduino Document Center (Cedoc), five people were murdered in Maranhão during that year, including two Indigenous victims (Zezico Rodrigues Guajajara and Kwaxipuru Ka'apor); a squatter (Raimundo Nonato Batista Costa); and two Quilombolas (father and his son Juscelino Fernandes Diniz and Wanderson de Jesus Rodrigues Fernandes). The latter two were killed by gunmen in Arari, in the village of Cedro, in front of Diniz's wife, children and grandchildren. A 2021 report by Cedoc-CPT (<https://www.cptnacional.org.br/downlods?task=download.send&id=14254&catid=5&m=0>) listed nine more deaths: Antônio Gonçalves Diniz (a Quilombola) and João de Deus Moreira Rodrigues (squatter) in Arari; José Vane Guajajara (Indigenous) in Bom Jardim; José Francisco de Souza Araújo (Quilombola) in Codó; squatter couple Maria da Luz Benício de Sousa and Reginaldo Alves Barros in Junco do Maranhão; babassu fruit collectors Maria José Rodrigues and José do Carmo Corrêa Júnior in Penalva; and another Quilombola in Parnarama.

Viana is only 52 km (32 mi) from Arari on the MA-014 road. The two municipalities have many geographical similarities: both are located in the vast floodplain of Maranhão's Amazon, where periods of flood and drought alternate. In this semi-aquatic habitat, riverside areas that were used sustainably by traditional peoples and communities for generations

causes problems today.

Arari stands out for its crime statistics. From 2020-2022, there were five murders in the villages of Cedro and Flexeira. The fifth victim was José Francisco Lopes Rodrigues, known as Quiqui, who was shot dead in his backyard by a gunman. One of the bullets hit his 10-year-old granddaughter, but she survived.

Violence in the municipality increased after a series of actions by the organization Citizenship Forums and Networks to guarantee access for traditional peoples and communities to the plains, much of them closed off with electric fences.



Buffalo ranching in Viana municipality. Image by Gui Christ.

These plains are huge areas flooded by rain and river water during the first half of the year. When they dry up in the second half, they retain abundant water and fish in ponds that have traditionally been dug by hand. But the invasion of these plains by buffalo herds and their closure by electric fences have sparked conflicts between ranchers and communities, prompting the latter to try to remove the fences and take their food sources back.

demolish the fences, alongside the emergence of new peasant leaders, has improved living conditions in the area. One of the main economic activities, pig farming, gained new impetus with the newly freed-up plains. After 2017, however, these actions angered farmers, land grabbers and Arari's political elite, Teixeira says.

Those who orchestrated the violence against the community have never been punished. A series of peasant arrests in 2019 generated public protests against the courts, the Public Prosecution Service and the local police. "To give you an idea, two of the 10 peasants arrested have already been murdered and one suffered an attempted murder in late 2021," Teixeira says. "In less than two years, five peasants and leaders of Citizenship Forums and Networks were executed in a cowardly manner in Arari."

He identifies Angela Maria Moraes Salazar, a judge on the Maranhão Court of Justice, and her husband, state attorney Carlos Santana Lopes, as perceived enemies of the families of the quilombo of Cedro.

Violence in the pursuit of progress

Arari's geographical location has long drawn the interest of agribusiness in the Amazon region. It includes part of the Baixada Maranhense Environmental Protection Area (APA) (<https://uc.socioambiental.org/pt-br/arp/785>), a reserve spanning almost 1.8 million hectares (4.5 million acres) that's irrigated by the high waters of the Mearim River during the rainy season.

Another aspect of Arari's location is the proximity to Maranhão's state capital, São Luís, which is an island on Brazil's Atlantic coast, connected to the mainland by a bridge over the Strait of Mosquitos, adjacent to the Campo de Perizes nature preserve. The bridge is part of the BR-135 federal highway, which connects ultimately to the industrial port complex of Itaqui in São Luís — a key shipping depot for mining giants Vale and Alumar, and for grain producers in the Matopiba region, the agribusiness hub straddling the border region between the states of Maranhão, Tocantins, Piauí and Bahia.

Alongside the BR-135 highway are Vale's Carajás railroad and water utility Italuís System's infrastructure, supplying São Luís. The landscape also features giant power transmission towers, including those run by electricity utility EDP Energias do Brasil.

towers are impacting them negatively.

The village of Frades, in Anajatuba, is home to an unusual site: flooded fields advance over the backyards of the houses where there are also large cisterns to capture rainwater. "That's our life. Lots of water for six months and then drought in the other half of the year," says family farmer Cleude Maria dos Santos. "That's why we store rainwater, but the fields provide food all year round. Now everything has changed with these transmission towers inside the fields, especially the fish, which used to be abundant and now are scarce."

Frades is one of eight communities in the Monge Belo Quilombola Territory, which spreads across the municipalities of Itapecuru-Mirim and Anajatuba, about 100 km (60 mi) from São Luís.

There are reports about a decline in fish as a result of the transmission line running over long stretches of the Amazonian plains, especially in the municipality of Santa Rita, located 78 km (48 mi) from São Luís. In the village of Papagaio and surrounding communities, residents say that the fish, once abundant, have become scarce since the transmission line was built.

Sitting on their porch after a day of work, Tania Fernanda, Antônio "Toca" José, Carlos Augusto Serejo Dias and other members of their family watch the endless downpour on the fields of Papagaio, just 9 km (6 mi) outside the municipality of Santa Rita. They say they remember the times when there were plenty of fish such as *anojado*, *carambanja*, *sarapó*, *jandiá*, *pirapema*, *jeju*, *traíra*, *piaba*, *casculo*, *piau*, *mussum*, *piranha*, *branquinha*, *curimatá* and many other species that were easily caught during major floods, even in people's backyards. In Ponta Grossa, another village in the Quilombola territory of Monge Belo, Josemar Mendes and Raimundo Nonato dos Santos say they also miss the abundant fish resources.



Antonio Serejo Dias, a fisherman and farmer in Papagaio village, in the municipality of Santa Rita. Image by Gui Christ.

At 70, farmer Rosa Maria Vera Dias is wrinkled from working in the sun since she was a child, when she used to fish and plant manioc, corn, rice and beans with her parents. Her eyes are sad when she talks about the lack of fish. She recalls a time when they would catch up to a ton of fish from her family's three ponds. "All this fishery failure started after the towers. It wasn't like that before," she says.

At the Santa Rita Public Market, there's scarcely any fish caught in the fields, but vendors say the scarcity isn't because of the electricity lines. The problem, they say, is the unregulated use of fixed drift nets known as caçoeiras during the period when the fish breed and spawn.

Electricity and water

In the waterlogged fields, the residents carve out small dams by hand, taking advantage of the bodies of water crisscrossing the plains. On the raised land on the periphery, they grow papaya, banana, lime and other small produce.

EDP Energias began building its MA I transmission line here in 2018. According to local leaders, communities were not consulted as they should have been under Convention 169 of the International Labor

Conven%C3%A7%C3%A3o OIT n %C2%BA 169.pdf). The convention requires signatories, including Brazil, to carry out a process of free prior and informed consent for projects that may affect Indigenous and local populations.



A transmission line crosses a farm in the municipality of Santa Rita. Image by Gui Christ.

On behalf of 434 fishers from 51 villages affected by the transmission line in the municipalities of Santa Rita, Anajatuba and Itapecuru-Mirim, lawyers Carla Andrea de Melo Dias Almeida and Júlia de Nazaré Costa Zenni filed a complaint with the State Prosecution Service (MPE) and the Federal Prosecution Service (MPF). The complaint called on the authorities to compel EDP Energias do Brasil to carry out mitigating and compensatory measures and environmental programs to make up for the damages caused by the construction and installation of the power line through the plains.

The community alleged a drastic level of intervention in the environmental balance of the local ecosystem, where the preservation of biodiversity, fish and fishing production used to guarantee traditional communities' sovereignty and food security.

communities, photographs, and aerial images and videos from the construction period, showing the use of tractors, cranes, trucks, boats and several types of heavy machinery during the fish spawning season in the Mearim River. The construction involved erecting the steel towers and running cables a total distance of 59.5 km (37 mi) across the plains. The complaint also noted that the State Department for the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMA) granted a preliminary license, and installation and operation started, without full compliance with the State Constitution and the Environmental Protection Code. Those statutes provide for the protection of natural plains, as do international conventions to which Brazil is a signatory, such as the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, known as the Ramsar Convention. The lawyers also questioned the lack of public hearings to consult with the communities and problems in the environmental impact study prepared by the company. They said the latter lacks an analysis of the aquatic life in the region, and complained of pressure on residents to sign compensation agreements for amounts less than the scale of the damage caused to their main source of food.

According to preliminary surveys presented to the two prosecution services, the fishing productivity of 790 dams in the plains amounted to 176 metric tons of fish in 2020, before falling sharply in 2021. Residents say the fish were driven away by heavy machinery, silting as a result of the digging, and blocked streams, which made it difficult for the fish to circulate and prevented their young from dispersing more widely. The residents also complained of oil spills and garbage dumping associated with the construction work.



Rosa Maria Vera Dias, a small-scale fisher in the community of Papagaio, in Santa Rita municipality. Image by Gui Christ.

"After all these efforts, in October 2021 we filed lawsuits seeking individual redress and protection of the environment in the realm of collective rights," says lawyer Carla Dias. "In current lawsuits under way

the entire region in 2021."

Local universities haven't carried out any studies into the aquatic life of the flooded plains that the communities could include with their complaint. But they did include a technical expert report from IBAMA, the federal environmental protection agency. It includes scientific references on the causal relationship between installation of electricity lines in aquatic environments and fish scarcity, based on two studies: Environmental Impact Assessment Guide: Causal Relationship of Reference for Power Transmission Systems

(https://www.gov.br/ibama/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2020/ibama-lanca-guia-de-avaliacao-de-impacto-ambiental-para-licenciamento-de-linhas-de-transmissao/20201229Guia_de_Avaliacao_de_Impacto_Ambiental.pdf), and Environmental Impact Assessment Guide for Power Transmission Systems

(http://www.ibama.gov.br/phocadownload/licenciamento/2019/2019-02-08_guia-aia-linhas-transmissao_Ibama_.pdf).

"Habitat fragmentation is associated with opening and/or adapting accesses; vegetation suppression; and opening and maintaining rights of way," the IBAMA report says. "Regarding the ichthyofauna [aquatic life], opening access may have established physical barriers that are hard or impossible for the fish to overcome, making fragmentation a process that goes beyond the construction period. One of the results of the behavioral disturbance of the ichthyofauna is that fish are driven away, and certain places previously used for feeding and breeding are no longer available."

Mongabay contacted EDP Energias do Brasil and emailed a list of questions about the project's construction. In a response, the company's communications office refuted the allegations by the communities. "The Miranda II-São Luís II C3 transmission line underwent a strict environmental feasibility process, and all studies and technical documents, including information about the construction work and its impacts, were discussed with stakeholders in public hearings as determined by the environmental agency in charge of licensing," the company said.

It added that "EDP focuses on preserving life as the core of its sustainability strategy and positions biodiversity as an essential element for operations and value creation. The Company develops a series of initiatives and commits to protecting the Environment and, to that purpose, it integrates the principles of sustainable development into the

Company's activities along the entire value chain."

Transmission lines also in Indigenous territory

Conflicts over the implementation of power projects have also occurred in the Gamella Indigenous lands, including lots of violence. In November 2021, Equatorial Energia, a private company that replaced Maranhão's state utility, CEMAR, tried to erect towers for a power line, LD Miranda, in the village of Centro dos Antero.

Two men armed with pistols arrived in a pickup truck and identified themselves to the Indigenous residents as the company's "private security guards." The Gamella made what they call a preemptive approach, seizing the weapons and returning to their homes in the villages. Later, they said they were surprised by the arrival of Military Police in vehicles, carrying out arrests and firing gunshots and tear gas to intimidate and coerce the villagers.

The Gamella were accused of kidnapping the "private security guards" and taking them hostage. The Military Police arrested 16 people, three of them women, including 49-year-old Craw Craw Akroá Gamella. They took them to a gas station, where they harassed, threatened, insulted and interrogated the villagers to reveal where the weapons were, the residents allege.

"I thought we were going to be executed," said Craw Craw. Another resident, Cohtap Akroá Gamella, remembered one particularly excited officer in a private room at the gas station: "If the guns don't show up, things will get ugly!" Afterward, they were all transferred to police stations in Viana and Vitória do Mearim. The men had their heads shaved, like prison inmates.

The incident was yet another case of violence against Indigenous people in Maranhão.

And those "private security guards"? It later emerged that they were in fact undercover state police working for Equatorial Energia.



Transmission line in the Akroá Gamella territory, in Viana municipality. Image by Gui Christ.

In a statement (<https://ma.equatorialenergia.com.br/2021/11/nota-a-imprensa-sobre-a-situacao-ocorrida-em-viana/>), the company said there had been a hostage situation: "While doing construction work, our associates were approached by the Akroá-Gamella, who asked for the work to be stopped and the activities to be suspended. On the morning of November 18, when the company sent employees in an attempt to schedule a meeting in order to understand the claims, the indigenous people became angry, held everyone hostage for a few hours, took the weapons from the police officers who were called to control the situation, and set fire to the company's vehicles. Help was called and the hostages were released unharmed."

For the traditional peoples and communities, the various forms of violence against them highlight the contrast between sustainable development and predatory progress, directly or indirectly related to an economic model based on agribusiness, land grabbing, mining and the steel industry, all connected to the expansion of the port complex in São Luís.

auctioned off in the municipality of Santa Helena to pay off a debt incurred by a man who claims to own the lands where the traditional community has lived for decades.

Banner image of Cohtap Akroá Gamella, an Indigenous man from the Taquaritiua territory. Image by Gui Christ.

This story was reported by Mongabay's Brazil team and first published here (<https://brasil.mongabay.com/2022/05/tensoes-na-amazonia-maranhense-opoem-indigenas-e-quilombolas-ao-avanco-do-progresso-predatorio/>) on our Brazil site (<https://brasil.mongabay.com/>) on May 19, 2022.

Support our journalism

Mongabay was founded as a nonprofit to ensure greater access to trustworthy information on our planet's most pressing issues. Reader support keeps Mongabay reporters on Nature's frontline, delivering daily environmental news and analysis on stories that matter. Join us with a tax-deductible donation to enable more environmental journalism that drives on-the-ground impact around the world.

DONATE

Article published by Hayat



PRINT
(AMP/?
PRINT)