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Brazil's Guaraní-Kaiowá people are no longer willing to wait quietly for the government to demarcate their land.

The threat of mass suicide by native Guaraní-Kaiowá people in southwest Brazil brought to light a new formula for worsening conflicts over indigenous territory: the expansion of the cultivation of soy beans and sugar cane, two top export crops.

The situation is the focus of a study, "Em terras alheias – a produção de soja e cana em áreas Guarani no Mato Grosso do Sul" (On other people's land: Production of soy beans and sugar cane in Guaraní areas of Mato Grosso do Sul), by Repórter Brasil, a local NGO.

Drawing on official data and research in villages of the southwestern state of Mato Grosso do Sul, the study mapped the cultivation of sugar cane and soy beans in six indigenous areas.

"When international commodity prices go up, it becomes more profitable to grow soy beans or sugar cane, and land values rise," investigative journalist Verena Glass, one of the authors of the study, told IPS. "With greater demand for land, large landowners arm themselves against the indigenous people, and conflicts surge, as happened last year."

In Mato Grosso do Sul, which is home to some 44,000 Guaraní-Kaiowá, conflicts broke out this year on cattle ranches. But the same logic is at work: there is "a dispute between commodities and lands claimed by indigenous people," she said.

When the report was presented on Oct. 24, the conflicts worsened. The study was carried out in July, when occupations by the Kaiowá to recover their territories led to confrontations and violent reactions by large landowners, including armed attacks on native encampments.

But the conflict crossed state borders when some 30 families of the Pyelito Kue Kaiowá community announced their “collective death” if they were driven off their land, which is currently in the process of being demarcated by government authorities as their communally owned territory.

Tired of waiting in encampments along the side of the roads, the native people occupied a small part of their ancestral lands that had been taken over by large landowners. But in October a court ordered their eviction.

When the news, interpreted as a threat to commit mass suicide, circled the globe by means of social networks, the government had the judicial decision revoked, so that the Pyelito Kue people could stay where they were until the demarcation process was complete.

The community was partly satisfied with the decision, Egon Heck, of the Catholic Indigenist Missionary Council (CIMI), told IPS.

They were happy, he said, because they would not be expelled from their land, but unhappy because they still have to live in overcrowded conditions on just one hectare, without being able to set foot outside it, for who knows how long.

“It’s a situation of aggressive confinement that has been going on for years and was aggravated by the court verdict,” said Heck, whose organisation is linked to the Brazilian Catholic Bishop’s Conference.

He asked how nearly 200 indigenous people, “linked to their territory and natural resources as their way of life, are supposed to manage to survive on one hectare.

“Can it be that the interpretation of the constitution, which guarantees collective land to these people, is being distorted by the interests of private property?” he asked.

Maurício Santoro, a human rights adviser to Amnesty International in Brazil, told IPS that Mato Grosso do Sul has areas densely populated with indigenous people, but that these areas are scattered between soy bean plantations and cattle ranches.

“These lands have not yet been demarcated by the federal government, and the legal vacuum has fuelled conflict,” he said.

Like Pyelito Kue, other communities were forced off their lands and are now living in camps by the side of the road, without medical services and constantly threatened by gunmen hired by local landowners.

“The waiting is killing people anyway,” Tonico, a Kaiowá Indian, told IPS in September. “No one is making decisions. We are going to occupy all our lands, even knowing that there is no security and that we are going to die. The people have decided.”

The rates of malnutrition, suicide and violence are extremely high in these communities, Santoro said.

According to CIMI, suicide has long been present among the Kaiowá and other Guaraní groups, particularly among young people. Between 2003 and 2010 there were 555 suicides.

Since 1991, only eight reserves have been formally approved for the Kaiowá-Guaraní people, who are the second-largest native group in Brazil but live in small territories.

The expansion of agribusiness, which has been heavily promoted by the state government, has

exacerbated the situation.

The type of agriculture practiced, based on intensive use of pesticides, the destruction of soil microorganisms and the devastation of rivers and forests, has been a “major aggravating factor” in the historic process of expulsion and extinction of the Guaraní-Kaiowá people, said Heck.

Agricultural mechanization and the use of toxic chemicals have also reduced the employment of indigenous people as workers on large estates or in ethanol plants, where sugar cane is used to produce biofuels.

“Soon they won’t even have this work, which may be in semi-slavery conditions but is practically the only income available, besides government assistance,” since they don’t have access to their own land, Heck said.

Repórter Brasil launched a campaign urging transnational corporations to boycott the produce of estates illegally located on indigenous lands.

“The idea is for big buyers to avoid purchasing products from indigenous lands, as a kind of punishment. That way, the producers are economically weakened, and the value of indigenous land is reduced,” Glass said.

Two ethanol plants in the state, São Fernando and Raízen, have promised not to buy sugar cane from indigenous areas.

But others, like Monte Verde, which belongs to the Bunge company, buy grains from five estates on indigenous lands that are still being demarcated, according to Glass. The company argues that it is not infringing any rules as long as the estate owners are not legally compelled to leave the areas.

The government of President Dilma Rousseff has promised to accelerate the process of

demarcation of native reserves. Meanwhile, rural producers are demanding economic compensation for leaving indigenous lands, and complain that one historic error is being paid for “with another historic error,” namely, penalizing a productive sector.