

Displacement of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil

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Executive Summary:

There are few nations that treat a sport with as much reverence as Brazil treats soccer, or as it is known globally, football. To many, it is simply the greatest rallying point in society. And so, in 2014, the eyes of the world turned to Brazil to watch the twentieth iteration of the FIFA World Cup. While the event was watched the world over, there existed a story behind the crowds, the story of the natives of Brazil that the culture seems to have forgotten. With recent attention being placed on Qatar and the rights of workers being violated, it is worth noting, that the infringement of the rights of people is not unprecedented in a host nation.

In 2007, Brazil succeeded in its attempt to be named the host of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and began setting in motion, its development plans for the event. Their bid to host to FIFA declared that seven new facilities would be created and five existing stadiums would be renovated to meet the new standards for the competition (FIFA). One such renovated stadium was the Maracanã, the crown jewel of Brazil's football history. It was created in preparation for the 1950 World Cup, where it hosted the Opening game and the Final, in which Brazil lost to Uruguay 2-1 (FIFA). In 2009, Rio De Janeiro was selected to host the 2016 Summer Olympics making the need for quality facilities near the city even higher (FIFA).

Since its debut in the cup, Maracanã had been used as a multipurpose facility, but the area around the stadium had fallen into disrepair. Before some of the urban decay had settled in, some of the unused buildings in the district around the stadium were claimed as community resources. One building in particular became the official museum for the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, the first of its kind in a major city (Daibert). But by 1977, the building was abandoned and the museum was no longer operational. However, this did not stop the native peoples of Brazil from using the space. Members of over 17 indigenous tribes began to reside in the area around the stadium and in the no-longer running museum. The surrounding areas became known as the “Maracana Village” and eventually became home to over 70 natives (Daibert). It served as an informal community shelter for displaced indigenous tribes-people until government targeted the areas surrounding the Maracanã stadium for necessary renovation to meet FIFA demands.

In March of 2013, police forces surrounded the “Maracanã Village” and negotiators were sent in to evict the tribes-people from the buildings. For many, the village had been the only place they had ever called home and were

unwilling to move. The negotiators told the natives that they would be relocated to a new government built facility, however, at the time, the facility was not yet built. In fact, construction on the relocation site had halted due to a lack of funds from the government (Froio). Unwilling to wait any longer, armed police stormed the compound with riot gear and tear gas. The violence was not only directed at the indigenous people in the camps, but rather anyone that was there to support the natives in their protest against removal. Eventually, all of the squatters were removed from the building and with the area cleared, it was immediately burned down. The space eventually went on to become a parking lot and a new stadium dedicated to the history of football in Brazil.

The displaced natives were forced from their homes and given nowhere to go. FUNAI or Fundação Nacional do Índio, Brazil's protection agency for the natives and their culture began working with the government to secure places for the displaced to turn to with little effect (Froio). And, the damage was already done. The Maracanã Village was destroyed, and in its place was the new expansion of the stadium.

Historical Context:

Brazil has had a complicated past with its treatment of indigenous people dating back to the first Portuguese explorers landing in South America. Numbering close to several millions, soon European diseases spread through populations, leaving many decimated or even completely destroyed. Much like North America, the Europeans took to calling the indigenous people as Indians, a practice that is still in practice in the Brazilian government today. Since 1910, the Brazilian government has especially treated these native peoples rights' with contempt. In 1910, the SPI or, the Serviço de Proteção ao Índio, was formed as the Indians' liaison to the government and to be the advocate of the Indians within the systems of government (Survival - FUNAI).

However, the SPI did not have the best interests of the people at heart. Instead, it served as a government front to weaken and destabilize the native people of the region. It's official mission was to “protect” the Indians, a goal which it attempted to achieve by bringing them into mainstream society so as to eliminate the cultural divide in the society as well as vacate their lands, a target of the growing agrarian economy of Brazil. SPI was involved in many plots to poison the tribes living on prime farm land, so that the government could then occupy the land once the Indians were too weak to defend themselves, or dead (Survival - World Cup).

The less than high ideals of the SPI lead to decades of mistreatment of the native people of Brazil. From the inception of the SPI in 1910 to its reformation in 1967, it is estimated that almost 100 different tribes were wiped out either through skirmishes with cattle farmers or disease. It is now estimated that there are only 200 distinct tribes remaining in Brazil today made up of a population of 1,000,000 Indians total. (Survival - FUNAI).

The military regime that took control of the country in the mid 1960's was both bad and good for indigenous people's right in Brazil. The military dissolved the corrupt and malicious SPI and founded FUNAI, a reformed entity still in place today. But it was also involved in the largest period of deforestation in Brazil's history (Survival - FUNAI). At the time, the motto of the military and therefore the government was that Brazil was the “country of the future. (Survival - World Cup). As such, there was an incredible focus on expanding the power of the Brazilian economy in the areas that would be easiest; Agriculture and natural resource exports.

Thousands of acres of forest were cleared without thought as to whether they were protected spaces or not.

Many of these cleared areas were home to native tribes, effectively rendering them homeless. The protected statuses placed on these forested regions were specifically put in place for the necessary preservation of indigenous culture as well as fragile ecosystems unique to Brazil (Tuxa). But the forests were destroyed regardless. As the economy grew, Brazil began an expansive hydroelectric push and placed several dams along the Amazon River. The overflow caused by the basins that formed from these dams rendered entire regions of forest uninhabitable due to the extreme flooding (Tuxa).

Again, all of this was done without the indigenous tribes having any say in the decision or any voice in government for that matter. When the military took power in the 1960's it established a two-party system, effectively silencing any fringe groups and limiting their access to protective legislation (Tuxa). This two party system was used to pass several laws limiting the rights of native people even further.

Even after the fall of the military regime, anti-native legislation was still being proposed and passed in the Brazilian government. In 2011, a law was passed that made all land allocation previously controlled by Indians was now under governmental jurisdiction and the distribution of land was legally allowed to be changed from current status. Indians had the land they lived on taken out from underneath them and had little recourse against it (Tuxa). Although no longer a tool towards their own destruction, the indigenous people cannot rely on protection from FUNAI due to its relatively small operating budget as compared to the agriculture firms that are pushing such land use legislation through.

Additional legislation limited the abilities of FUNAI itself. One bill made it so that FUNAI was unable to engage in the licensing process for establishing environmentally protected areas, limiting its influence on the areas that the natives inhabited (Tuxa). In doing so, FUNAI was pushed into strictly advocacy work rather than the legislative activist role that it had played previous.

But going beyond, legislative prejudice, indigenous people in Brazil face even greater problems. It is estimated over 100,000 Indians live in urban slums such as the "Maracanã village" in cities across Brazil (Malta). These are often temporary shelters and can be shut down by the state in the name of "public safety" (Amnesty). But it is not just the natives living in such regions, the urban poor in Brazil are the primary residents of these favelas. On average, over 2,000 people are killed annually by Brazilian police forces, the overwhelming majority of which reside

in Rio (Amnesty). In the past ten years, 10,000 of the police related deaths in Rio involved live ammunition (Amnesty). Police forces aren't only stripping these people of their homes, they are ending their lives.

Case Analysis:

The cause of these flagrant violations of human rights seems to stem from two sources: Brazil's driven to remain competitive in the world economy and pressure from outside entities. Both of these factors were influenced by domestic decisions and were internally perpetuated, but these outside influences drove the violations nonetheless. According to the World Bank, Brazil is currently the world's 7th largest economy, followed closely by California, Italy, India, and Russia (World Bank). Brazil is rich in natural resources and has a moderate export based economy. Although it has a rapidly expanding technological export sector, the focus of most of Brazil's outgoing trade are crops and other raw materials. Brazil has been the largest producer of coffee for the last 150 years and one of the world's largest exporters of beef (World Bank). It is able to do this by dedicating so much of its land to government subsidized farmland. Herein lies the problem that the Brazilian government has with indigenous peoples.

In order to maintain its foothold in the world economy, Brazil has to be constantly producing the raw materials that make it so valuable. Therefore, more and more farmland is needed every year to meet increasing demands. Brazil must turn to its lush-resource rich rain forests to find this necessary space for farmland. In the past, it has been the practice of the Brazilian government to disregard its own restrictions on logging protected areas to expand available land for farming. The land was protected either to conserve the fragile ecosystem of the rain forest, or to preserve the living space of the native tribes. Believing the need of the economy to be greater than the preservation of its heritage, Brazilians have logged massive sections of the Amazon rain forest in order to yield large areas for more farmland.

To aid in this process of land development, the government has gone back on its own protection and passed laws denying the Indians access to resources that would defend them in the legislature. Native people of Brazil were stripped of their rights to representation in government simply because they lived where the government wanted to grow the economy. The disconnect between a misrepresented group of citizens and the government meant to protect them is apparent. The reasoning of the government is that the greater good of the state outweighs the rights of the minority. And so, so many indigenous people are displaced from their homes in the forest and consigned to camps or slums in the major cities of Brazil, such as the Maracanã Village in Rio.

The problem that the Brazilian government has in the growing slums of Rio and other urban areas, is entirely

a self inflicted wound. Only a tenth of those identifying as indigenous remain in the forests of Brazil today. That leaves almost 900,000 homeless Indians in the favelas that have come to be infamous the world over (Malta).

Now, not all living in the favelas are native people, but Rio has a population of just under 13 million citizens and is unable to create infrastructure to house almost a million of those people. The largest slum in Rio has almost 150,000 residents (Malta). This means that any amount of migrants coming in from the forests will not help the rampant urban poor problem that Brazil faces. Therefore, destroying forest for farmland is only exacerbating the problem that Brazil is experiencing in its urban centers. A symptom of this over population and blatant lack of regard towards human right is the high levels of police violence. The violence that took place at Maracanã is a perfect example of this systemic violence towards the poor and indigenous people of Brazil. The very fact that these people were living in the museum is a direct product of their displacement, which is in turn, a direct product of government programs to expand farmland.

But why did the museum need to be torn down in the first place? To appease FIFA. In light of recent events, football's governing body has been exposed and corruption seems to go all the way up to the highest reaches of the organization. In the bids to propose to host the World Cup, FIFA has a minimum stadium requirement. It requires that host nations build a minimum of 4 new stadiums just for the event in order for a bid to be accepted (FIFA). This might be possible in a first world country such as England or the United States, but to demand this of the two most recent hosts, South Africa and Brazil, is a bit extreme. Both are by no means impoverished nations but they are on the cusp of emerging from the third world and billions were spend preparing for these games (FIFA). Billions that could have been poured into the citizens instead. Now, the Brazilian government was the one who made the bid and therefore knew the costs of hosting such an event, but there is something to be said for the national pride of a nation that values soccer above all else. It could be argued that FIFA took advantage of this fanatic love of the sport and turned it into leverage with Brazil into building the facilities it wanted, even though they were beyond Brazil's means. Looking at the recent allegations, such an argument would not be a stretch when it comes to FIFA. Unfortunately, the Brazilian government were willing to win the bid no matter the cost and the Brazilian people are paying the bill in more than money, but rather in lives.

Due to the spectacle of the World Cup, there is little recorded about the aftermath of the displacement that took place at Maracanã. Unfortunately, the world turned its eyes to the fields that were paid for in blood and failed to

see the cost.

To reconcile would take dramatic steps on the part of the government to not disregard its own laws and enhance the protections that it had already put in place. Bringing the people of Brazil back together after such a betrayal but its government will not only take time, but it may not be possible to replace what has been stolen. Not only are these rain forests a world heritage and vital ecosystem for biodiversity, it are where these indigenous people have called home for millennia. The lost of their homes is permanent. The devastating logging can never be undone. Instead, a nation must move forward with what it is capable of achieving. It begins with realigning its priorities towards the protection of the its citizens and their way of life rather than Brazil's bottom line. The Maracanã Village was not just a home; it was a last refuge of culture for a way of life that is too rapidly disappearing. Something must be done to preserve it.

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