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Indigenous Guarani leader appeals to Europe to save people and forests

7 June 2017 / [Lucy EJ Woods](#)*Guarani-Kaiowá leader Ladio Veron is touring Europe seeking international support to end attacks and killings of indigenous people, land theft and environmental harm in Brazil.*<https://news.mongabay.com/2017/06/indigenous-guarani-leader-appeals-to-europe-to-save-people-and-forests/>

- Brazil's Temer administration is seriously violating the rights of the Guarani-Kaiowá people according to their leader, Ladio Veron, who is touring Europe this Spring to garner support for the rights of indigenous people in Brazil.
- Veron, in presentations and petitions across Europe, has highlighted the rising violence against indigenous people in Brazil, publicized past and on-going land thefts, and protested the efforts of the Temer government to halt the demarcation of indigenous lands guaranteed under the nation's 1988 Constitution.
- The tour is being conducted against a background of escalating civil unrest and public protest in Brazil, as the Temer government staggers under the weight of corruption charges. His administration's approval rating is in the single digits and near collapse, though the current National Congress has also been antagonistic to indigenous rights.



European allies joined Guarani leader Ladio Veron at a London demonstration protesting against the anti-indigenous policies of Brazilian President Michel Temer. Photo © Eleanor K. Russell courtesy of Survival International

Ladio Veron, leader of Brazil's indigenous Guarani-Kaiowá people, is touring Europe and making a desperate international appeal to halt attacks and killings, land theft and environmental destruction that his people say have become a hallmark of Brazil's Temer administration.

The Guarani-Kaiowá is fighting for recognition of their indigenous land rights in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul in southwest Brazil, bordering Paraguay. After decades of violent territorial disputes with cattle ranchers, soy and sugar cane farmers, Veron hopes to galvanize support and build an international network of allies that will put pressure on Temer and the agribusiness lobby-dominated National Congress back home.

Europe "cannot solve this," Veron told Mongabay, but it "can support us, add pressure, condemn the situation and demand that our rights and land are recognized."

The leader's three-month tour, starting in March and ending in July, coincides with rising tensions between the state and indigenous people across Brazil which have erupted into protests, followed in some cases by violent attacks. Now in Spain, the tour includes visits to Greece, Italy, the UK, Portugal, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland, France, Belgium and Austria.

"I'm here to fight for justice for my people," Veron said as he led a peaceful protest outside the Brazilian embassy in London this April. As he accepted encouragement and hugs from demonstrators, he acknowledged, "I've come such a long way."



Guarani leader Ladio Veron. Photo © Eleanor K. Russell courtesy of Survival International

The Brazilian Embassy confirmed receipt of a petition from Veron on behalf of the Guarani-Kaiowá containing a "request for land demarcation and safety" and it described the protest as a "peaceful and democratic meeting."

The [petition](#) demands the Temer government "map out Guarani land immediately."

Before European settlers arrived in South America, there were as many as a few million Guarani people. Today there are around 51,000 living in Brazil — about a third of which are Guarani-Kaiowá. In the early 1900s, the state's Indian Protection Service (SPI) reduced Guarani-Kaiowá land to eight reservation areas, totalling just under 30,000 hectares (115 square miles). Now the same lands are home to "new towns and factories," says Veron.

According to the Brazilian Embassy, today about "13 percent of Brazil is demarcated indigenous areas, or approximately 1,173,000 square kilometers (453,000 square miles) — more than four times the size of the United Kingdom."

The full demarcation of indigenous lands was guaranteed under Brazil's 1988 constitution, but the government has long delayed completing the project. "The land is still not given, we do not know why," says Veron.

The Guarani-Kaiowá now live on small roadside patches, each no bigger than a football pitch. Veron says there have been 46 successful land reclaiming attempts. Each attempt regains a farm or patch, a couple of square miles in size.



Protesters call for indigenous rights in Brazil. Photo © Eleanor K. Russell courtesy of Survival International

While previous governments have made empty promises to recognize and return Guarani-Kaiowá land, delaying the demarcation process, the current government is hurriedly moving to approve plans to halt the demarcation process altogether.

Farmers, would-be land owners and land thieves have reacted to the indigenous land reclamations, government inaction and anti-indigenous rhetoric, by sometimes hiring gunmen. As a result, according to a 2015 [report](#) by the Brazilian NGO Conselho Indigenista Missionário (Indigenous Missionary Council or Cimi), 390 Guarani-Kaiowá leaders were killed between 2003 and 2014. More were attacked and seriously injured.

In hopes of ending this violence, the petition Veron delivered to the Brazilian embassy in London has now been "transmitted to our Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brasília and to the president of Fundação Nacional do Índio, the National Indian Foundation [FUNAI]," an embassy spokesperson said. FUNAI is Brazil's state body responsible for policies protecting indigenous people.

In May, a federal [Parliamentary Commission](#) recommended the abolition of FUNAI and called for the arrest of some of its employees for allegedly illegal activities in support of the indigenous movement. During the tour, European signatures are being collected for petitions opposing the recent, crippling [funding cuts](#) to FUNAI.

While FUNAI's budget has been "dangerously low for many years," says Sarah Shenker, senior campaigner at NGO, Survival International, the most recent spate of cuts is "not an accident. Powerful politicians are attempting to reduce its power and impact." Critics say the newest cuts come as the *bancada ruralista*, Brazil's agribusiness lobby, seeks to be rewarded for their support of President Temer in his rise to power last year.

"It's an emergency that could spell extinction for uncontacted tribes," adds Shenker.



Brazilian tribal leader Ladio Veron hands a letter demanding land rights to a Brazilian embassy official in London. Photo © Eleanor K. Russell courtesy of Survival International

The tour is also gaining European signatures on a petition urging a no vote by the Brazilian Congress on "PEC 215". This constitutional amendment would remove powers from FUNAI to restore indigenous lands, transferring that power to Congress, whose members are heavily influenced by agribusiness interests.

While long term impacts of the tour are unknown, short term, the Guarani-Kaiowá people's "voice has been made clear," says Shenker.

The Guarani-Kaiowá tour has prompted favorable media reports in Brazil, Spain, Italy, the UK and Germany. "There have been a lot of publications in many languages; there has been a good response from the media," says Shenker. And many European organizations have offered assistance, including faith groups in Italy and environmental activists in Greece.

Spanish, German and Austrian members of parliament all met with Veron. The UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group on Human Rights has committed to monitoring human rights abuses against the Guarani-Kaiowá, as has the Irish political movement, Sinn Féin. Requests that the issue be raised in the German and European Parliaments are also in motion.

"International pressure can make a difference," says Shenker.

Veron has visited the [Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona](#), spoken with activists in Leipzig, East Germany and been on numerous radio shows. In Austria, he spoke at a school about how European food consumption habits are directly linked to the politics of the agricultural lobbies in Brazil — soy grown on former indigenous lands feeds people worldwide.



It helps when people in Europe "realize that what is happening to indigenous people is not just a situation that is far away, and not to do with us," says Shenker.

The tour is a direct response to the Guarani-Kaiowá losing faith in the current government. "What Temer proposes is nothing short of genocide and ethnocide for indigenous peoples," says Seb Muniz, senior international programmes officer at War on Want Latin America.

Temer is not "the first one to violate our rights and discriminate against us," Veron told Mongabay. For years, state promises to protect indigenous people and restore lands have not been fulfilled. There is "no reply" and "no results," says Veron, "no answers, no follow ups."

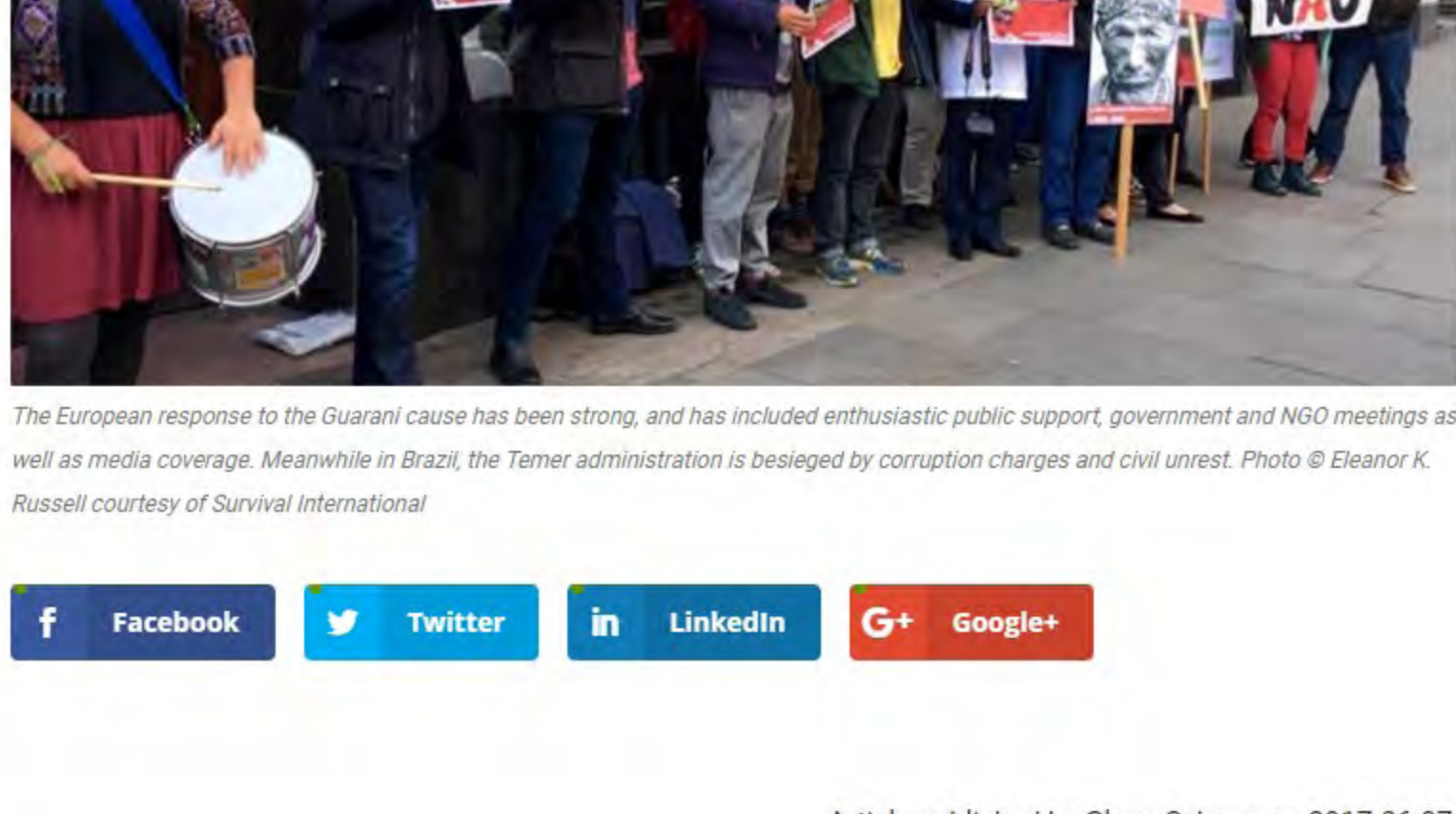
"So many times, [our] leaders go to the capital to speak with the government, but they are not listened to," says Veron. "We ask for parliament, for congress, the senate, for an audience, but they will not receive us." In May, the largest indigenous protest ever in Brasília, the country's capital, was [met with teargas and rubber bullets](#).

"The last solution is to come to Europe and to ask for support," says Veron. "We don't have anyone to turn to in Brazil."

As the tour unfolds, Brazilians are falling deeper into despair, as corruption rocks the country. "Repression, militarization and an ever-growing disregard for democracy leaves the most vulnerable in Brazil in a particularly challenging situation," says Muniz.

Temer's austerity reforms, privatization attempts, cuts in social programs, environmental assaults and concentration of political power represent an attack "not only on indigenous people but on all popular and vulnerable sectors of Brazilian society," Muniz concludes.

"The movement is strengthening," Shenker says, but with the fate of the Guarani-Kaiowá people and Brazil's remaining rainforests very much in doubt, "it's more important than ever that people everywhere stand up."



The European response to the Guarani cause has been strong, and has included enthusiastic public support, government and NGO meetings as well as media coverage. Meanwhile in Brazil, the Temer administration is besieged by corruption charges and civil unrest. Photo © Eleanor K. Russell courtesy of Survival International

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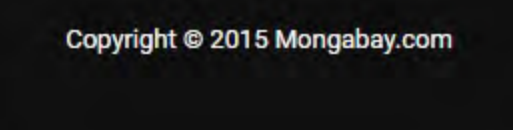
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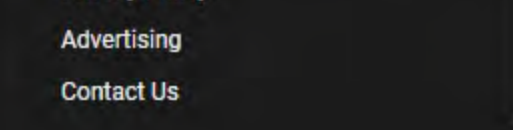
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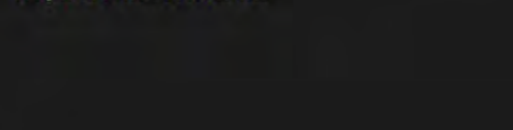
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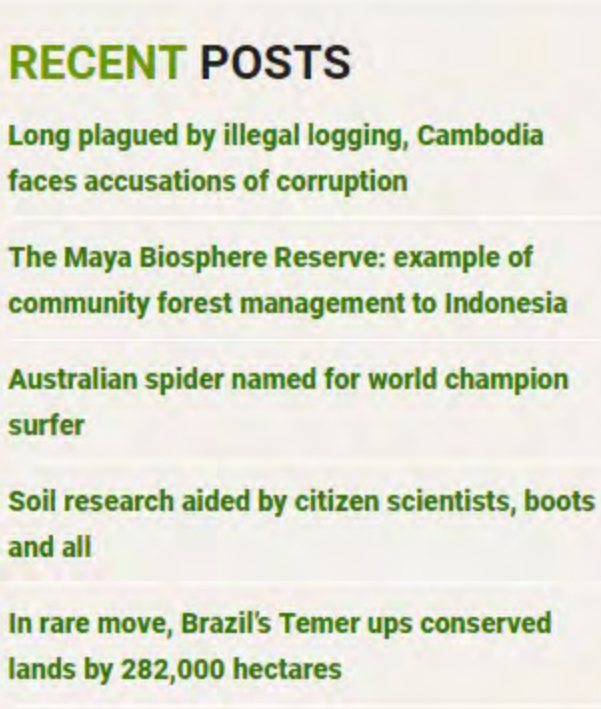
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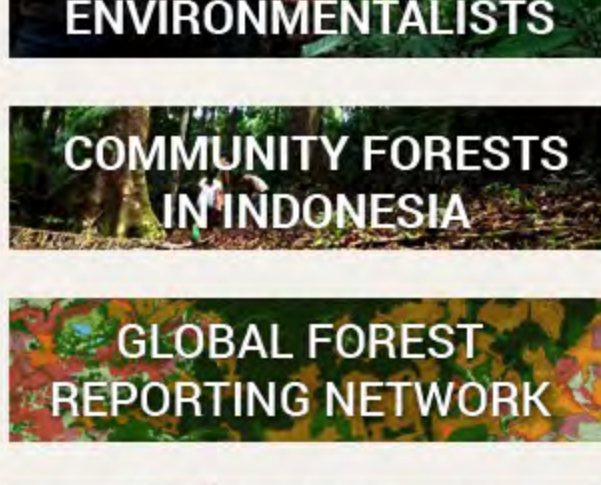
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