

Storms and fury

Violent weather presages human violence. DAN BARON COHEN writes from a community and country on high alert.

Right at the peak of the carnival's last night, the storm broke, scattering the crowds. In seconds, the tempest cleared the village square of macho funk and competing sound systems as well as the skies over Cabelo Seco of the military helicopters that had scanned the community's streets and River Tocantins' walkway since the carnival began. We barely slept, moving buckets from our bedroom to kitchen, front room to hallway, as the wind changed direction and new leaks appeared in our tiled roof.

I mop the floor and open the window, catching sight of the river in the gap between two houses, which a year ago promised to become a new home for a headteacher, who was hoping to profit from the 'revitalization of Marabá'. Like a missing front tooth, it attracts attention, accumulating symbolic power as the community's riverside story changes behind it.

'The river has risen again!' I shout to Manoela, as she prepares a green juice from the plants in her herbal garden. 'At least a metre. Today, the waterfront could flood.' The neighbour's parrot in the street behind the herbal garden squawks the national anthem continuously, catching the urgency of Brazil's political crisis in its insistent pitch. 'There are hundreds of families camped in that empty lot beside the school,' shouts Manoela over the juice-mixer. 'The army isn't posted there just for emergency aid. And now six cities have declared a state of calamity. My god in heaven!'

The Tocantins has changed from drought to flood alert in just days. Higher up, the Santa Rosa community

has already been evacuated, and we can no longer pass from Pioneer Marabá to New Marabá, as the only road is flooded and blocked by fallen bamboo trees. The Itacaiúnas River has flooded Paraupebas City, a few hours up-river, a region with the largest iron mines in Brazil. Everyone knows deforestation causes climatic chaos, yet no-one protests against the sweeping changes to the Forest Laws designed to protect the Amazon.

Our neighbour Zequinha, Cabelo Seco's minstrel and guardian of the community memory, passes below our window. He holds out his mobile phone, which plays a triumphant military parade and chants, and beckons with a sharp jerk of his head. 'They suspended government in Rio last night. Presidential decree. Gave full control of security to the army to clean the streets of drug barons and homeless youth. And the people cheered. Does no-one remember the military dictatorship?' I sit beside him. He replays the clip of a brutal military invasion of Rossinha *favela*. 'They should invade the supreme court and the senate,' Zequinha seethes, 'if they want to root out the cause of the corruption and violence.'

The video is shocking. Gunfire rakes streets which look just like Cabelo Seco's. Zequinha shows me photos of dead bodies and weapons. 'They've already removed this clip from Facebook. I'll pass it to you.' I nod. 'Who shot the clips and the photos?' I ask. So much is circulating, creating a national climate of panic and desperation, strengthening the call for military intervention. Zequinha shrugs and stands to show

another neighbour the clip. 'And Évany?' he asks, 'any news?'

I suddenly begin to cry, silently. Zequinha returns to sit beside me, looking down at the open sewer behind our feet. I breathe deep. 'It's a miracle she didn't lose the eye. Imagine the force needed to break a beer bottle on a face.' Zequinha is impassive. Évany is his protégé, a virtuoso musician at just 18. 'Does she know who did it?' he asks, without looking up. I shake my head. 'She took refuge in the California from the storm. It was dark. Packed with dancers. Emergency surgery removed the shards, then they stitched up her face. She's brave, but terrified she'll lose her vision.'

We sit in silence. Évany's chance to lift herself beyond the socio-economic apartheid in this region trembles on a horizon of no hope. Territorial disputes between dealers claimed Zequinha's youngest son. Crack turned his first-born into a shell. But this arbitrary violence has merged with state repression to create a pervasive panic and mistrust. I look up at the gap between the simple wooden houses, missing tiles on every roof. 'The rivers of the world,' Zequinha warns, 'will rage.' ■

Dan Baron Cohen is an eco-cultural activist who lives in Marabá and has been working in the Amazon since 1999.

