

# £BRAZIL

## @Human Rights Violations Against "Brasiguaios" and Other Landless Peasants in Mato Grosso do Sul State

Amnesty International is concerned about reports of serious human rights violations against Brazilian peasants and their families in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, central Brazil. The peasants and their families had recently returned to Brazil from Paraguay where most of them have been living for a number of years. The alleged violations include illegal detentions, allegations of excessive use of force by the police, intimidation and a possible extra judicial execution.

### **Background**

During the 1960s hundreds of Brazilian peasant families emigrated to Paraguay in search of land and work. Some of these families became landowners in Paraguay, the majority, however, became squatters. During the 1980s there were around 300.000 Brazilians in Paraguay. In 1989 the first conflicts between Paraguayan farmers and landowners and Brazilian peasants began to emerge. At the time Paraguayan farmers and landowners started to reclaim the areas occupied by Brazilians. Subsequently the "Brasiguaios", as they are commonly known, started to return to Brazil. Around 150.000 people have returned since. "Brasiguaios" have not been welcomed in Brazil, where land disputes between peasant smallholders and landowners are common and an endemic source of violence.

### **Illegal detention, excessive use of force, threats and harassment of peasants in Rio Brillhante, Matto Grosso do Sul**

According to the information received by Amnesty International, on Sunday 17 May 1992 18 men from a group of around 350 peasants and their families who had invaded two estates, fazendas, in the municipality of Rio Brillhante, were detained at gunpoint by gunmen from one of the estates.

The peasants were allegedly kept under armed vigilance by the gunmen in open land for over 24 hours. During that time some of them were made to undress and lie down on their backs under the sun for a long period of time. The peasants were continuously threatened with death by the gunmen who did not allow them to communicate among themselves. During the night the detainees could not sleep because buckets of water were poured over them. Some of the peasants alleged that they were beaten up by the gunmen. Others were reportedly made to kneel down and pray under death threats. The peasants were released by their captors, who apparently were acting with the connivance of the military police, on the evening of the following day, Monday 18 May.

On the same day, 18 May, when the remaining peasants were evicted from the estates by the military police, in collaboration with gunmen, allegedly under the command of a local landowner, three journalists that were covering the eviction were reportedly beaten up by gunmen in full view of military police officers.

On 30 July around 400 military police men reportedly entered by force to a camp of around 390 "Brasiguaios" families camped near the BR 163 highway in the municipality of Rio Brillhante, allegedly in search of stolen oil cans. The police allegedly used firearms and tear gas to enter to the camp. Two men and a woman from the camp were reportedly wounded by shots fired by the police and several others were allegedly beaten up. The "Brasiguaios" alleged that the police took away tools, money and personal belongings of the campers.

### **Death threats and harassment in Amambai, Mato Grosso do Sul**

In a separate incident, on 24 May 1992 around 400 families of "Brasiguaios" crossed the border between Paraguay and Brazil and headed towards the Itapoty fazenda in Amambai, Mato Grosso do Sul, an area of unproductive land. One of the coaches transporting the families was allegedly fired at by police officers, military police and gunmen. The seven coaches which were transporting the families were denied access to the Itapoty fazenda by the Transport Police, Policía Rodoviária, and were settled in an area of the Amambai municipality close to the frontier. The families have been there since.

More people have continued to arrive at the Amambai camp. According to information from the Brazilian Red Cross in Mato Grosso do Sul there are at present approximately 2000 people in the camp. According to the Red Cross' report health conditions in the camp are deplorable. The people living in the camp, including women and children, are living under plastic sheets, drinking contaminated water and going hungry. The camp is reportedly surrounded by armed gunmen, jagunços, hired by local landowners, who openly threaten and harass the "Brasiguaios" living in the camp. On 14 June four gunmen on horseback reportedly attacked the camp, firing more than 50 shots against the camp. Leaders of the "Brasiguaios" have reportedly received death threats.

No action has apparently been taken by the Policía Rodoviária to protect the "Brasiguaios".

### **The Killing of José Alves de Vasconcelos**

According to the information received by Amnesty International, on 11 June 1992 José Alves de Vasconcelos, a driver of one of the coaches used to transport the "Brasiguaios" was shot dead by an unknown gunman in the municipality of Amambai, Mato Grosso do Sul. José Alves de Vasconcelos had been allegedly threatened in previous weeks for helping Brazilian peasants returning from Paraguay to Brazil to resettle.

While Amnesty International takes no position on competing claims in land disputes, it is concerned that gunmen, allegedly acting on behalf of landowners have carried out intimidation and killings of peasants, their leaders and advisers with a high degree of impunity in rural Brazil. The Brazilian authorities at all levels have in the vast majority of cases failed to take effective action to prevent or investigate the killings or to bring those responsible to justice.