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Brazil: Authorities must act to stop killings across the Amazon

Amnesty International is extremely concerned about a series of brutal killings of rural leaders over the past week.

Since last Tuesday, 24 May, four people have been shot dead in Pará and Rondônia states in what appear to be contract killings; in three of the cases, the victims were activists who had been subject to death threats. As the issue of deforestation and large-scale development in the Amazon comes to the fore once more, scores of environmental activists across the region remain at risk.

On Tuesday, 24 May, the environmental activists José Cláudio Ribeiro da Silva and his wife Maria do Espírito Santo da Silva were shot dead by two gunmen after being ambushed at bridge in Nova Ipixuna, Pará state. According to reports from local NGOs, one of the gunmen cut off José Cláudio's ear as proof of the killing. The murders took place within the extractive reserve where three hundred families live by harvesting Brazil nuts and cultivating tropical fruits. A respected community leader, José Cláudio, had frequently denounced incursions into the reserve by illegal loggers and cattle ranchers. He had said shortly before his death that because of his defence of the forest he was living with the threat of "a bullet in the head at any moment".

On Friday, 27 May, rural leader, Adelino Ramos was shot dead in Vista Alegre do Abunã, Rondônia state. An activist from the Movimento Camponês Corumbiara, Ramos had also denounced illegal logging and received previous threats. In an event in Manaus in July 2010 he told the National Agrarian Ombudsman (Ouvidor Agrário Nacional) and the Commission for the combat of Rural Violence and Conflicts (Comissão de Combate à Violência e Conflitos no Campo) that he feared for his life and passed on details of those making threats against him.

On Saturday, 28 May, Erenilto Pereira dos Santos a 25-year-old farmer from the same community as José Cláudio Ribeiro da Silva and his wife Maria do Espírito Santo da Silva, and a possible witness in their case, was shot dead. Police are now investigating whether the three murders are indeed related.

These killings took place as Congress passed amendments to the country's forest protection laws – a move widely seen as weakening existing environmental controls. Local NGOs are now concerned that these changes will generate further conflicts and rural violence, as small holders and extractive reserves come under increasing pressure from illegal loggers and ranchers.

Amnesty International welcomes the federal government's initial moves to set up an inter-ministerial working group to analyse a list of 125 people under threat, drawn up by the Pastoral Land Commission, (Comissão Pastoral da Terra). However, much more needs to be done to avoid further tragedies.

The region's long history of impunity and lawlessness must be confronted. The authorities, including the federal environment agency, IBAMA, the Federal Police, the National Agrarian Ombudsman (Ouvidor Agrário Nacional), the National Program for the Protection of Human

Rights Defenders and state public security services, must work together, pooling information to investigate all threats and protect those at risk. Those responsible for the killings, including those who ordered them, must be brought to justice.

Background Information

The south of Pará state has long been a focal point rural violence, but frontier areas where illegal loggers and ranchers operate in Maranhão, Mato Grosso and Rondônia states also have a history of rural conflict and violence. Lack of effective state presence in these areas, and a lack of political will to intervene, has meant that rural elites have been able to use force with impunity against environmental and land activists.

Impunity remains a key obstacle. According to the CPT, over 1,500 have been killed in rural violence since 1985, but less than 100 people have been convicted. And only one person who ordered a killing -- Vitalmiro Bastos de Moura for ordering the killing of sister Dorothy -- is currently behind bars. Over 1,800 rural activists have received death threats over the past decade; of these 42 have been killed, with a further 30 suffering attempted homicides.

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