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Brazil: Amnesty International calls for an end to the bloodshed after activist's murder

Amnesty International condemns the killing of 74-year-old Sister Dorothy Stang, on February 12, in Anapú, Brazil. Sister Dorothy was shot several times as she walked to attend a meeting.

Sister Dorothy, a nun and native of Ohio in the US, worked as a human rights and environmental activist in the Amazon for over thirty years and had been subject to constant death threats as a result of her work. This is the latest of hundreds of killings of trade unionists, environmentalists and land activists in the Brazilian state of Pará that Amnesty International has documented over decades. The violence has been exacerbated by the long-term neglect shown by state and federal authorities to fighting impunity and protecting human rights defenders at risk.

Amnesty International is calling on federal and state authorities to ensure a permanent end to the violence and fear suffered by so many in the state. Federal authorities recently promised to address the vulnerability of human rights defenders in the area, and it is vital that these promises are backed up with swift action. These measures must include steps to disarm and disband all illicit armed militia, judicial and police reforms to ensure an effective response to such violence, and immediate measures to protect human rights defenders and land activists from death threats.

Background

Amnesty International has long denounced both the violence in the state of Pará and failure by the authorities to address it. Illegal loggers and miners as well as large landowners have increasingly resorted to hiring gunmen and creating illicit armed militia to protect their economic interests. Those fighting for the defence of human rights, land rights, labour rights or environmental protection have consistently been subject to threats, attacks and killings as a result.

The violence has been sustained by a painfully slow judicial system which perpetuates a state of impunity. Last year the Catholic Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) stated that only five people were in prison for the 976 killings which took place nationally between 1985 and 1996. In the state of Pará cases such as Eldorado dos Carajás, where 19 land activists were killed by members of the military police, still languish in the courts nine years after the massacre took place.

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