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Brazil: Justice delayed is justice denied

Eighteen years after trade union leader João Canuto de Oliveira was assassinated by hired gunmen, the two landowners charged with ordering his killing will finally be brought to trial on 22 May 2003.

"Countless brutal killings of rural workers have taken place during the eighteen years it has taken the Pará state authorities to bring the landowners suspected of ordering the killing (*mandantes*) of João Canuto to trial. The slowness of the judicial process and the failure to punish those responsible for these murders have clearly contributed to the continued pattern of violence," Amnesty International said.

Those who have died include two of João Canuto's sons, José and Paulo Canuto; Expedito Ribeiro, João Canuto's successor as president of the trade union for rural workers (*Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais*); and, most notably, the 19 land activists who were massacred by members of the Pará military police at Eldorado dos Carajás.

According to the Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra*), over 400 rural workers have been killed in land-related incidents since 1980 in the South and Southeast of Pará. Yet only one person has been sentenced for ordering a killing during this time!

"The Brazilian justice system will remain compromised by the continued failure to act promptly on evidence of torture and extrajudicial executions. The Brazilian authorities should vigorously address impunity at all levels. Justice delayed is justice denied," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International will be present at the trial so as to ensure that all international standards are met and so as to inform the many thousands around the world who have followed this case of the judicial process. The organization will be represented by renowned Uruguayan jurist and former senator Dr Edgardo Carvalho who has observed several trials for Amnesty International in Brazil and in other parts of the region.

Background

Eighteen years ago, on 18 December 1985, rural trade union leader and father of six small children João Canuto was shot several times by two hired gunmen. He had constantly received death threats as a result of his campaign for agricultural reform and land rights. He received his last death threat five days before he was killed. Two of his sons were subsequently killed. One son survived an assassination attempt and members of his family continue to be harassed and intimidated today.

On 6 June 2000 Jerônimo Alves de Amorim was convicted for ordering the killing of Expedito Ribeiro de Souza, the first time such conviction had taken place in the state of Pará.

A vital victory in the fight against impunity, this conviction was a testament to the determination, courage and resourcefulness of local human rights activists who would not give up under the intense pressure they faced.

The trial of João Canuto is taking place due to the courage and persistence of human rights activists in Pará who consistently face threats, attacks, intimidation and defamation as a result of their struggle to end the violence and discrimination against rural workers and bring its perpetrators to justice.

Public Document

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