

AMR 19/019/2002
Public

VOTE TO PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS IN BRAZIL

Agesandro da Costa Pereira

[photo]

"Falar muito já levou o Denadai. Pode levar outras pessoas do seu relacionamento...Não adianta achar que a Justiça vai fazer qualquer coisa porque tem gente muito grande no negócio...Quantas pessoas você agüentaria enterrar nesta altura da vida?"

This threat was sent to Dr Agesandro da Costa Pereira, President of the Espírito Santo branch of the *Ordem dos Advogados Brasileiros* (OAB), Brazilian Bar Association, in April 2002, after he called for a federal investigation into killings in the state, including that of local lawyer Marcello Denadai. The killings were suspected to be the work of "*Scuderie Detetive Le Coq*", a police organization, allegedly operating as a "death squad".

This threat was made even more real by the explosion of a bomb in the Vitória offices of the OAB on 25 July 2002.

Luckily, none of the 130 lawyers and staff was hurt. However, those like Dr Agesandro who fight for justice and human rights and dare to challenge institutionalized violence and impunity in Espírito Santo and elsewhere in Brazil are in constant danger.

Federal investigations have indicated that all branches of the Espírito Santo authorities have been infiltrated by organized crime and systematic human rights violations have long gone unpunished in the state.

Dr Agesandro played a pivotal role in establishing "*Reage Espírito Santo*", a forum for human rights activists in the state. As a consequence he and his family and colleagues have received death threats since 1999.

In the face of such threats, Dr Agesandro and many other human rights defenders continue to put their own safety at risk for the benefit of all in Espírito Santo. They need your support.

Threats against human rights defenders

It takes courage to be a human rights defender in Brazil. Every year human rights defenders are killed because they dared to speak out against human rights violations.

Yet, despite the risks, people from all walks of life continue to join them. Some work with human rights organizations. Many are lawyers, prosecutors or journalists. Witnesses who brave the threats to testify to the terrible human rights abuses they have seen are also human rights defenders. All have one thing in common. They face death, assault and intimidation by police officers, "death squads" or hired gunmen operating with the acquiescence of the authorities. Seldom are the perpetrators of such crimes brought to justice.

The commitment of human rights defenders is not always recognized. Some call them "*defensores de bandidos*" for upholding the rights of the most marginalised people in the community such as street children, homeless people and ordinary prisoners.

Yet human rights defenders seek to protect people's rights in places where the state is negligent or complicit in human rights violations. They too need protection when their work brings them into conflict with the perpetrators. It is imperative that presidential candidates acknowledge the important work of human rights defenders and their own responsibility to uphold human rights. They should work to ensure that the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders is implemented in Brazil and that those responsible for attacks on defenders are brought to justice.

An agenda for human rights

<p>Amnesty International's concerns</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Hundreds of unlawful police killings of criminal suspects and unarmed civilians * Police links to "death squads" responsible for hundreds of killings * The killing of land reform activists and the use of violence and politically-motivated criminal charges to intimidate and harass them * The killing of human rights defenders, and attacks and threats against them * Systematic and widespread torture by police officers and prison guards * Inhumane conditions in prisons and police cells * Failure to protect the rights of indigenous communities * Impunity for the perpetrators of human rights violations 	<p>Amnesty International recommends</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Consultation with human rights defenders to develop policies to ensure that they can carry out their work without fear of retaliation * The establishment of an independent and effective commission of inquiry into police killings * The creation of a federal human rights ombudsman's office that is independent, fully funded and mandated to investigate any human rights violations * The ratification of key international human rights treaties and effective monitoring at state level of those already ratified * Creation of a fair and independent system to transfer human rights crimes to federal justice * Bringing to justice state agents responsible for acts of torture under the torture law (No. 9455/97)
---	--

Amnesty International, International Secretariat, 1 Easton Street, London WC1X 0DW, United Kingdom (www.amnesty.org)