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Brazil: Rural activists once again under attack in southern Pará

The killing of trade unionist José Pinheiro de Lima and his family is just the last in a series of serious attacks in a mounting wave of harassment against rural activists and landless peasants in the south of Pará state, Amnesty International said today.

José Pinheiro de Lima, his wife and 15-year old son were killed by gunmen in their home in Morada Nova, Marabá, on 9 July -- only five days after another peasant worker, Manoel Messias Colono de Souza, had been shot dead on a farm occupied by landless peasants also near Marabá.

"The authorities are not challenging the actions of gunmen, nor are they granting protection to landless peasants and rural activists, even in the face of repeated threats against them," Amnesty International said.

Since April this year, at least 129 rural workers have reportedly been arrested in Pará and an estimated 1,500 families have been evicted from lands they were occupying. The situation has deteriorated after landowners reportedly asked state government authorities for support in dealing with land occupations.

During one such eviction in the Fazenda Bannach, in the municipality of Bannach, members of the military police squad who took part in the operation reportedly removed their name tags, making it impossible for them to be individually identified.

Amnesty International is alarmed to note that police actions carried out under these circumstances in the past have lead to the

killings of large numbers of activists, such as those of 19 landless peasants in El Dorado dos Carajás in 1996.

"Some progress recently made in court cases concerning the killing of rural activists raised hopes that the long-standing tolerance of such killings and the impunity surrounding them would come to an end," Amnesty International said, making reference to the conviction in June 2000 of a landowner for the 1991 murder of trade unionist Expedito Ribeiro de Souza in the south of Pará.

"However, the increasingly critical situation faced by rural activists and landless peasants in southern Pará seems to indicate that this is a case of one step forward and three steps back," the organization continued.

Amnesty International is urging the Brazilian authorities, and in particular those in Pará, to ensure that all human rights violations against rural workers are thoroughly and independently investigated and that those responsible are brought to justice.

"The message from the authorities must be clear: the killing and harassment of landless peasants and rural activists will not be tolerated," the organization said. "The forthcoming trial of the officers believed responsible for the El Dorado massacre will be a test of the Brazilian authorities' commitment to upholding the human rights of all Brazilians."

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