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Hired gunmen threaten rural communities in Brazil

Brazilian authorities must investigate acts of violence and intimidation by hired gunmen against rural workers in the north of the country, Amnesty International said today, amid ongoing threats targeting two communities.

Shots were fired on the night of 6 June over two rural workers' encampments where some 40 families live in Palmeirante, in the state of Tocantins, the latest in a constant series of threats that began last October.

Local farmers and smallholders in the area have been involved in a long-running land dispute that has been escalating with the use of hired gunmen to intimidate the workers.

"We're very concerned for the safety of families in these communities, who are living in constant fear after their leaders have been 'marked for death' by hired gunmen," said Patrick Wilcken, Researcher on Brazil for Amnesty International.

"To properly protect the human rights of those in the communities, the authorities must fully investigate all reports of threats and violence, and bring to justice those responsible."

A federal body responsible for land reform in Brazil set up Assentamento Santo Antônio Bom Sossego in 2003, and landless rural workers also settled in the nearby Vitória encampment. Since then, farmers and more recently illegal loggers have moved into the area and have been harassing the workers' encampments.

On 16 October 2010, rural worker Gabriel Vicente was shot dead, allegedly by gunmen hired by a local farmer to intimidate the communities. Gunmen have also allegedly burnt down rural workers' huts and made a series of threats against the workers and five community members are said to be on a hit-list of people targeted.

Police have not responded adequately to complaints about the attacks, adding to a culture of impunity.

According to the national Catholic Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra, CPT), land disputes in Brazil have led to more than 1,000 murders since the 1970s, very few of which have been successfully prosecuted.

Over the past month, several people have been killed in attacks that appear to be targeting social and human rights activists in areas of Brazil's Amazon rainforest.

"As Brazil's economy continues to boom and rural land is increasingly being sought for agriculture and other development, the authorities must ensure that human rights abuses against local communities come to an end," said Patrick Wilcken.

“The authorities must complete the region’s land-reform process and bring long-term security to the threatened communities.”