

PUBLIC

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UA 171/98 Fear for Safety / Excessive use of force /
Health Concern

9 June 1998

BRAZIL 450 families, all members of the Landless Workers Movement (MST)

Fears that the safety of 450 landless peasant families at the Canudos encampment, Goiás state could be in danger have grown after a federal judge issued an eviction order against them on 4 June 1998.

This follows the violent police eviction on 31 May of 200 other landless families from the nearby Alta Floresta settlement, during which 45 people were allegedly injured.

The Canudos encampment was designated for resettlement purposes for the landless in 1997 by the federal government's agrarian reform agency (INCRA). Due to lack of progress the land was subsequently occupied by the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST), Landless Workers Movement in October 1997. This occupation ended when military police intervened, allegedly firing guns and rockets.

Since the current occupation began on 27 May the military police have allegedly prevented anyone entering or leaving the Canudos camp. They have also refused to allow in food or medicine. The MST believe that some of the people inside are suffering from hepatitis and Chagas disease.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

On 31 May, 250 heavily armed military police, accompanied by dogs, horses and helicopters, evicted over 200 landless families from their encampment in Alta Floresta, Itaguari municipality, Goiás state. The squatters resisted using their farm tools. Forty-five people were injured, including women and children. Three people who suffered injuries including a gunshot wound and broken ribs required hospitalization. Two police were also injured.

Twenty-six MST members, including some of those wounded, were arrested on charges of disobeying an eviction order, despite the fact that the eviction warrant was not read out to the families until *after* the police operation. Nineteen-year old Divino Soares Pereira was allegedly beaten and kicked in the kidneys by police to force him to confess to injuring a policeman. All were released on 4 June following the intervention of Bishop Dom Tomás Balduino, the president of the Catholic Church's Pastoral Land Commission.

Military police evicting landless peasants who are peacefully occupying idle private or public land have often used excessive force, including extrajudicial executions and torture. On 9 August 1995 military police killed nine landless peasants in Corumbiara, Rondônia state. On 17 April 1996 they massacred 19 members of the MST in Eldorado de Carajás, Pará state. As a result, federal legislation now requires a member of the Ministério Público, State Prosecution Service, to monitor all evictions, though this rarely happens.

Amnesty International takes no position on the question of land tenure or agrarian reform per se. However, it is deeply concerned at the continuing human rights violations and impunity in the context of land conflict.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in Portuguese or your own language:

- voicing your concern for the safety of the 450 landless families currently in the Canudos encampment;
- urging the authorities to allow food and medicine to the families in Canudos;
- urging the authorities to use negotiation and to avoid excessive force in resolving the conflict over land in Canudos;
- expressing concern that 45 landless peasants were injured by military police during an eviction on 31 May 1998 in the Alta Floresta encampment and calling on the authorities to carry out a full, impartial and prompt investigation into this incident and for those responsible to be brought to justice.

APPEALS TO:

State Governor, Goiás State

Exmo. Sr. Governador do Estado de Goiás
Sr. Naphtali Alves
Palácio das Esmeraldas
Praça Cívica N°1
Goiânia GO
74001-970, Brazil

Telegrams: Governador, Goiás, Brazil

Faxes: + 55 62 224 0022

Salutation: Vossa Excelência / Your Excellency

Public Security Secretary, Goiás state

Exmo. Sr. Secretário de Segurança Pública do Estado de Goiás
Sr Joneval Gomes de Carvalho
Secretaria de Segurança Pública
Rua 66, N° 12, Centro
Goiânia GO
74055-070, Brazil

Telegrams: Secretário Segurança Pública, Goiás, Brazil

Faxes: + 55 62 202 2332

Salutation: Sr Secretário

COPIES TO:

MST- Goiás
Rua 65, No 194
Setor Central
Goiânia, GO
04045-100 Brazil

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and to diplomatic representatives of Brazil accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 21 July 1998.