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## **Brazil activist appeals ‘politically motivated’ prison sentence**

A Brazilian court is due to hear an appeal early next week by a prominent human rights lawyer amid ongoing violence against land reform activists.

José Batista Gonçalves Afonso, a lawyer and activist in the northern state of Pará, could face a prison sentence of more than two years for his minor role in an incident during a protest by landless rural workers more than a decade ago.

His appeal comes after five land activists in Brazil’s Amazon region were gunned down in suspicious circumstances during the past month.

“There are strong indications that José Batista’s trial is politically motivated and his imprisonment would have a potential chilling effect on human rights defenders in Brazil,” said Patrick Wilcken, Brazil Researcher at Amnesty International.

“The suggested sentence is extremely harsh, given the circumstances. It is no coincidence that José Batista is a high-profile human rights defender in a state renowned for violence and impunity.”

In March and April 1999, some 10,000 landless rural workers staged a demonstration calling for land reform outside the federal agency for agrarian reform in Marabá, Pará state. After 20 days of protest, some of the workers entered the building and prevented agency employees from leaving overnight.

José Batista, a law student at the time, was inside the building with a team of negotiators representing the rural workers. He and others were charged with “false imprisonment” (cárcere privado) of the agency’s employees.

Brazilian law allows for alternative sentences in such cases, and José Batista was originally given a lesser sentence that did not include imprisonment. But a federal judge in Marabá overturned this ruling in 2008 and sentenced José Batista to two years and five months in prison, which he is now appealing.

As a lawyer for the Catholic Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra, CPT) a national NGO, José Batista has often represented landless workers and rural activists against large land owners.

He has worked on high-profile cases, including the massacre of 19 landless workers in Eldorado dos Carajás in 1997, the killing of US nun Sister Dorothy Stang in 2005, and the recent killings of environmental activists, José Cláudio Ribeiro da Silva and his wife Maria do Espírito Santo.

He has received numerous death threats as a result of his work.

According to the CPT, land disputes in Brazil have led to more than 1,000 murders since the 1970s, very few of which have been successfully prosecuted. It is not uncommon for large landowners to hire gunmen to intimidate and kill land activists.

“In Brazil today, dozens of human rights defenders live with a price on their heads,” said Patrick Wilcken.

“In many cases, the state is not only failing in its duty to protect them and investigate the threats they face, but it is also in effect using the courts to harass them and criminalize dissent.”