

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **The Brazilian High Court of Justice faces historic decision on human rights**

On 25 August, the High Court of Justice (Superior Tribunal de Justiça, STJ) will meet to determine whether the killing of human rights defender Manoel Mattos, along with the activities of death squads in the north-east of Brazil, will be investigated and judged at the federal level.

Mattos's case, which is currently being heard in local courts, is taking place against a backdrop of violence and intimidation, including the recent attempt on the life of witness Maximiano Rodrigues Alves, who was shot at four times. This follows a long history of threats against prosecutors and police chiefs investigating death squad activity in the region.

In a region in which allegations of the involvement of the local police and politicians in death squads are longstanding, Amnesty International believes that any related trial will be compromised. Only through federalisation can the killing of Manoel Mattos and countless other victims of death squad activity be adequately addressed.

Five years after the federal parliamentary inquiry into death squads uncovered a vast network of death squads across the north-east of Brazil, local authorities have failed to root out the problem. As a result of this inertia, local NGOs and human rights organisations, including Justiça Global and Dignitatis, have launched a campaign for the federalisation of Manoel Mattos's case, along with several hundred other killings linked to local death squads.

Since a constitutional amendment was introduced in 2004 allowing the federalisation of cases of grave human rights abuses in order to ensure compliance with Brazil's obligations under international human rights treaties, no case has yet been prosecuted by the federal authorities. Were the High Court of Justice to vote to federalise this case, it would be a milestone in the fight for human rights in Brazil.

According to figures given to the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, Philip Alston, up to 70% of all homicides in Pernambuco are committed by death squads – many with direct connections to local police.

In 2005, Manoel Mattos testified and provided evidence to a federal parliamentary inquiry into death squads in the north-east of Brazil. He described how these groups worked in the border area between the states of Pernambuco and Paraíba which remains a focal point of killings of street children, rural workers and alleged petty criminals. In one document produced in collaboration with the prosecutor's office he denounced over 100 homicides by members of local death squads.

After receiving repeated death threats, on 24 January 2009, two hooded men broke into Manoel Mattos' house and shot him in the chest at point blank range.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: [press@amnesty.org](mailto:press@amnesty.org)  
International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK