

amnesty international

BRAZIL

CHICO MENDES

Two Years After



December 1990
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The Murder of Chico Mendes

Rubber tapper leader and grassroots environmentalist Chico Mendes was assassinated on 22 December 1988. Local, state and federal authorities moved quickly to investigate the crime and make arrests, apparently as a result of intense international pressure and publicity. Investigation focused on the Alves family, which had been repeatedly accused of acts of violence against rural workers in three states. Family head Darli Alves and sons Darci Alves and Oloci Alves were arrested, and other members of the family were investigated but not apprehended. Darci Alves and Oloci Alves were also indicted, and later convicted, for the attempted murder of rural workers who were peacefully demonstrating in Xapuri in May 1988. Other family members are said to have continued to threaten rubber tapper leaders with death, as recently as early December.

After many delays, legal manoeuvres and postponements, Darli Alves and Darci Alves were tried for the murder of Chico Mendes on 12 to 15 December. They were each convicted and sentenced to 19 years' imprisonment. Security arrangements at the prison where they are held are reportedly inadequate; the National Rubber Tappers Council has expressed concern they they could escape or be killed in jail.

Darli Alves' conviction marks the first time in the Brazil that the person who ordered a murder (so-called mandante) of a trade unionist has been tried and found guilty. Human rights groups in Brazil are calling for reopening of the investigation of Chico Mendes' murder, on the grounds that other possible mandantes, whom he accused of plotting his death, have not been questioned.

Since 1980 more than 1,000 rural workers, trade unionists, priests, lawyers and others struggling for land rights have been killed in Brazil, but only a handful of gunmen have been brought to justice in a few cases. A pattern of official acquiescence or complicity with mandantes is evidenced in long delays in carrying out investigations and trials, disappearance of evidence and court records, failure to protect witnesses or those threatened with death, and police attacks (including suspected extrajudicial executions) on posseiros (peasant settlers without title deeds). In another case, the gunmen (former military police) who killed trade unionist Sebastião Lan in June 1988 in Rio de Janeiro state were arrested, indicted, tried and convicted, but the mandante, though identified by authorities, has not been brought to justice.

Human Rights Violations against Other Rural Leaders

Compared to other cases, the trial and conviction of Chico Mendes' murderers occurred within a relatively short time after his death. Hundreds of other murders of rural leaders remain not only unsolved but uninvestigated, and throughout 1990 rural trade unionists have continued to be threatened and killed. Osmarino Amâncio Rodrigues, one of Chico Mendes' successors as a rubber tapper leader in Acre, has received numerous death threats during the past two years. (See UA 66/89, AMR 19/03/89, 3 March; follow-ups AMR 19/10/89, 13 April, and AMR 19/14/89, 6 June 1989; UA 218/90, AMR 19/15/90, 25 May 1990; and UA 473/90, AMR 19/34/90, 21 November 1990.) Amnesty International continues to be concerned about his safety and the safety of other rural leaders.

Elsewhere in Brazil, two rural leaders, Homero Patrício dos Reis of Espírito Santo state and José Hélio da Silva of Pernambuco state, were reportedly killed by hired gunmen in November and December, respectively. Earlier this year two brothers, trade unionists Paulo Canuto de Oliveira and José Canuto de Oliveira, were killed, allegedly by military police, in Pará state (see UA 167/90, AMR 19/06/90, 27 April 1990). A third brother, Orlando Canuto de Oliveira, was wounded. According to the Catholic church's Pastoral Land Commission, 61 rural workers are known to have been killed in conflicts related to land rights during 1990. The numbers of killings may have declined since their peak in 1986 and 1987, when hundreds died in rural violence, because leaders may now be more selectively targeted.

Those responsible frequently appear to be police officers -- on-duty or off-duty -- and ex-officers, who continue to terrorize posseiros in rural areas. For example, during the past five years, posseiros near Terra Nova, northern Mato Grosso, have reportedly suffered escalating attacks by civilian gunmen and civil police. These have included expulsions, house burnings, attempted murders and, on 15 October, the massacre of four members of a family, Creuza Cardoso de Oliveira, José Pedro Martins de Souza, Raymundo Ferreira de Souza and Franciene Cardoso de Oliveira, aged seven. The seven-year-old girl was decapitated. Local human rights groups say that one of the accused gunmen in the massacre case may have been arrested, but there was no investigation of the killing of another local posseiro, Élio Marins, in September. As in many other cases, public outcry about the massacre led authorities to promise action, but within a month the police announced the end of their investigation without having brought in the supposed mandante for questioning. These killings took place in a remote

area of Mato Grosso where violence is widespread in frequent conflicts among gold miners and farm workers.

The head of the Federal Police recently called for the creation of a Special Agrarian Judiciary to speed legal proceedings related to rural violence. Other federal officials have said little about the subject. Thus, although the trial of Chico Mendes' murderers gained considerable national and international attention, the overall situation in the countryside has changed little in the past two years.