

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

21 January 2002

AI Index AMR 19/002/2002 - News Service Nr. 12

Brazil: The shadow of political killings

The pattern of attacks against politicians from the PT (workers' party) must be investigated, and security measures put in place to allow them to fulfil their work, Amnesty International said today following the killing of PT mayor Celso Daniel of Santo Andre, São Paulo state.

Although the circumstances surrounding his killing are still unclear, it follows numerous threats and attacks against PT politicians in the state of São Paulo over recent months, in a wider context of violence against the PT across the country. This includes the killing in September 2001 of PT mayor Antônio Costa Santos of Campinas, also in São Paulo state, and the attacks reportedly made against three other PT mayors in the state over the last four months.

"We urge the federal government to fully investigate the possible political motivations for these crimes," Amnesty International said, stressing that the perceived threat of political violence poses a fundamental danger to the political process and the basic human rights of all citizens.

The organization also called on the federal government to investigate reports of consistent violence against PT politicians throughout the country. As detailed in a report prepared by PT federal deputies, and presented to the Minister of Justice on 4 December 2001, those involved in the investigation and reporting of corruption, organised crime, and human rights abuses are particularly at risk. This report states that since 1998 there have been 12 killings, 15 attempted killings and 52 cases of death threats against PT politicians.

"The killing of mayor Celso Daniel should not be used as an excuse for the authorities to introduce 'quick fix' public security measures, which may attract electoral support but which do not respect international standards, the rule of law and the human rights of all Brazilians," Amnesty International said.

"We recognise that all governments have the right and, indeed, the duty to ensure the safety of their citizens, especially when facing large scale levels of urban crime," Amnesty International added. "Nevertheless, introducing further repressive policing and public security measures in a country widely condemned the systematic torture committed in its prisons and police stations, will not contribute to the fight against crime nor provide the modern and thorough policing which will guarantee the protection of the Brazilian population."

Background:

On 10 September 2001 the PT mayor of Campinas, Antônio Costa Santos, was shot four times. Following a slow police investigation those responsible are still to be brought to justice. In the same month, the mayors of Franca, Batatais, Ribeirão Preto and Ribeirão Vermelho all received death threats, allegedly from a group calling itself the *Frente de Ação Revolucionária Brasileira* (FARB), Brazilian Revolutionary Action Front. On 11 November 2001, the farm of the PT mayor of Ribeirão Correntes was invaded by four hooded gunmen, who claimed to be "looking for the mayor's head" ("buscar a cabeça"). He had also been receiving threats from the FARB. On 28 November, the mayor of Embú survived the bombing of his house.

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