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Brazil: The Eldorado dos Carajás massacre 10 years on

On 17 April 1996, military police began clearing landless protesters from the PA-150 highway at Eldorado dos Carajás in the state of Pará. An hour later 19 people lay dead, many shot at close range; some hacked to death by the protesters' own farm tools.

After a complex legal battle, 127 military police and 19 higher ranking officers went on trial in June 2002. All were absolved with the exception of Col. Mario Pantoja and Major José Maria Oliveira, both of whom remain at liberty while they fight a second appeal against their sentence.

The Eldorado dos Carajás case is emblematic of the culture of impunity in Pará state. Ten years after the massacre, not one of those involved have been imprisoned. Inept police investigation, woefully inadequate forensic research, and the failure to offer protection to witnesses who received threats have dogged the judicial process at every step along the way. Neither the then state governor of Pará, Amir Gabriel, nor the Secretary of Public Security, Paulo Sette Câmara, who gave the orders to "clear the people" the PA-150 Highway "at any cost" have ever stood trial, making a mockery of the principle of chain-of-command responsibility.

Tragically, the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre is far from an isolated case, in a state that has become infamous for land-related violence. According to the Pastoral Land Commission, 773 people – many of them activists or community leaders - have been assassinated in land disputes in the state of Pará in the last 33 years. Only a handful of cases have ever been prosecuted, with just three prosecutions against those who ordered the killings.

Failure to bring perpetrators of human rights abuses to justice has made Pará state synonymous with lawless brutality. Inadequacies at every level of the criminal justice system, undue influence of wealthy landowners, and a failure of political will to address root problems are entrenched. Land activists still work under constant threats of violence and intimidation; gunmen continue to operate with virtual impunity.

Ten years after the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre, it is time for the state authorities to take responsibility for the high rates of land-related killings in Pará by addressing long-standing injustices. Authorities must uphold international human rights standards in the investigation of rural violence and the prosecution of those responsible.

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