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Brazilian Military Accused of Killing Landless Campesinos to Face Trial

by LADB Staff

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In an unprecedented court decision on Nov. 12, Judge Otavio Marcelino Maciel of the Criminal Court in the city of Belem, 2,300 km north of Sao Paulo, ruled that more than 150 Brazilian military police must stand trial in a civilian criminal court on charges of murdering 19 people during a campesino demonstration in April 1996. The decision by Judge Maciel will affect 153 state troopers who opened fire on April 17, 1996, on 2,000 campesinos demonstrating for land reform along an isolated stretch of highway in Eldorado do Carajas in the state of Para (see NotiSur, 04/26/96 and 08/02/96).

Those being charged include the Para military police battalion commander, Col. Mario Colares Pantoja; Mayor Jose Maria Pereira; six other officers; and 145 soldiers. If found guilty, the police, whose trial will likely take place next year, could face between 12 and 30 years in prison. The Eldorado massacre was one of the bloodiest episodes in the land conflicts that have proliferated in Brazil. On the day of the incident, Movimento Sem-Terra (MST) organizers had shut down a highway in El Dorado dos Carajas demanding the expropriation of a farm that had been occupied by campesinos.

Apparently under orders from their commanders and the state government of Para, the military police fired on the demonstrators, killing 19 people. The incident was captured on video and televised nationwide, showing the rock-throwing demonstrators advancing toward police, who opened fire on them with machine guns.

Following the incident, an outcry by national and international human rights groups prompted the Brazilian government to pledge to speed up its land reform program and punish those responsible for the massacre. After a military investigation concluded that the police were merely following orders, civilian authorities moved to press murder charges against those involved through the civilian courts. The judge's decision was applauded by campesino leaders in Brazil. "Our hope is that those guilty of the massacre will finally be punished and that injustice and impunity will not continue to be the rule in Brazil," said Gilmar Mauro, a leader and organizer of the MST. "We hope the chief commander of the Para military police and Almir Gabriel, the state governor, will also be held responsible for the crime, since they gave the orders to the soldiers to shoot at the demonstrators."

Land distribution a source of widespread violence

The MST has been fighting for land reform for years. Their tactics include occupying large unproductive estates throughout Brazil, where land ownership is one of the most uneven in the world. According to the latest figures from the Catholic Church's commission on land issues (Comissao Pastoral da Terra, CPT), the richest 20% of the population owns 88% of the land, and the poorest 40% hold just 1%.

This skewed distribution has led to chronic rural violence. Nearly 1,000 landless campesinos and their leaders have been killed in the past 10 years, according to the CPT. MST leaders estimate that 78 million ha of land is uncultivated in Brazil, much of it belonging to wealthy farmers who live in cities and use their property for tax write-offs. And, human rights workers accuse members of the police in many rural areas with working hand in hand with landowners who are vehemently opposed to campesino demands for agrarian reform.

On Nov. 14, 400 ranchers from the states of Minas Gerais, Bahia, and Espirito Santo met in the town of Mucurici, about 825 km north of Rio de Janeiro, and threatened to use more violence if landless campesinos continue to occupy their properties. Members of the MST have been occupying several ranches in southeast Brazil for more than two weeks. One of the squatters was killed and two others were wounded in early November in confrontations with ranchers in Mucurici. "We have decided that there will be no more invasions here," said Expedito Pereira, secretary of the Mucurici Rural Union. "Ranchers will defend their land any way they see fit."

Meanwhile, lawyers and church leaders are pressing Brazilian authorities to investigate the death of a leader of the MST in northern Brazil. The police said the man, Elizeu Oliveira da Silva, hanged himself in a cell in the town of Apui in the state of Amazonas after being arrested for allegedly threatening his girlfriend. Family members, however, said that his body showed signs of torture. Witnesses also said that he could not have hanged himself because the ceiling of the cell was too low. (Sources: Associated Press, 10/18/97, 11/13/97; Spanish news service EFE, Reuter, 11/13/97; Deutsche Press Agentur, 11/17/97; BBC, 11/18/97)

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