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LADB Staff

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High-level Brazilian Politicians Accused of Ties to Organized Crime

by LADB Staff

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A Brazilian congressional investigation has uncovered ties to organized crime by high-level state and national officials. Much of the activity is linked to drug trafficking in Brazil. The scandals are further weakening the administration of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, whose support is already at a record low.

A Comissao Parlamentar de Inquerito (CPI) on Sept. 22 approved a highly critical report on drug trafficking and the activity of death squads in the northwestern jungle state of Acre. The report links the criminal activities to legislator Hildebrando Pascoal, who was head of Acre's Policia Militar before becoming a deputy. The report accused 28 people, including Pascoal, his brother, and two cousins, of being members of an international crime ring.

Pascoal, who was accused of torturing and dismembering some of his victims with a chain saw, was stripped of his congressional immunity Sept. 22 and immediately arrested. Although he has denied the accusations, Pascoal was expelled from the ultraconservative Partido da Frente Liberal (PFL). Police and prosecutors claim that he received political protection and support from former Acre governor Orleir Cameli, who is under investigation for drugs-related offenses.

Pascoal is the second member of the lower house to be expelled this year for allegations of murder. Impunity for office holders and law-enforcement officials is a serious problem in Brazil.

The CPI has also implicated federal Deputy Augusto Farias in Pascoal's criminal activities. Farias is the brother of the late Paulo Cesar (PC) Farias, who was at the center of the corruption scandal that brought the resignation of former president Fernando Collar de Mello in 1992. PC Farias, who was Collar de Mello's campaign manager, was killed in 1996, and Augusto Farias has been accused of ordering his brother's murder. Civilian defense minister also accused The accusations of ties to organized crime spread to Defense Minister Elcio Alvares, also a member of the PFL.

The Oct. 3 edition of the weekly news magazine Istoe reported that Alvares had links to death squads and a crime operation controlling drug trafficking and gambling in the northeastern state of Espirito Santo. Alvares is now under investigation by the national intelligence service. Istoe reported that civilian-police detective Francisco Vicente Badenes, who received a national human rights award in 1996 for his fight against death squads, accused Alvares of ties to illegal gaming, corruption rings, drugs and arms trafficking, and death squads.

One connection is the president of the state legislature, Deputy Jose Carlos Gratz, a friend of Alvares, who allegedly runs a huge illegal gambling ring. Badenes gave investigators a file that included the organizational structure of a paramilitary group headed by Alvares and Gratz. Alvares,

named in June as the first civilian head of the armed forces, met with Cardoso Oct. 4 and said he would file charges against the magazine. "The president has never had the slightest doubt that his defence minister has behaved correctly, and he received confirmation of this in their meeting today," said presidential spokesman Georges Lamaziere.

Report links politicians and crime in Piaui

Meanwhile, on Oct. 6, Justice Minister Jose Carlos Dias said he received a police report linking various officials in the state of Piaui with organized crime. The Federal Police report, based on tapes of more than 1,000 telephone conversations that were obtained through a court order, implicates more than 80 mayors, a judge, and various state police officers and commanders in various criminal activities, including assassinations, misappropriation of public funds, illegal arms sales, and extortion. "It is a dreadful situation," said Dias, confirming that the tapes incriminate reserve Col. Jose Viriato Correia Lima, head of the Policia Militar in Piaui, one of Brazil's poorest states.

Dias said he would consult with Piaui Gov. Francisco Moraes about a possible federal intervention in the state. The federal police recently increased their presence in Acre following the charges of criminal activity there. Some experts believe that the increase in drug trafficking in Brazil is at the root of the lawlessness.

"Especially in the frontier states, drug traffickers are trying to infiltrate and, to a certain extent, already have the executive, legislature and judiciary," says Moroni Torgon, the federal deputy heading the CPI. "There is a big risk of politics getting contaminated by drug trafficking," said Walder de Goes, a political analyst in Brasilia. "It already seems that a number of deputies from the north have been financed by drug money."

Attention turned last month to Mato Grosso on the Bolivian border, when Judge Leopoldino Marques do Amaral was murdered. His burned body was found Sept. 7 across the border in neighboring Paraguay. Shortly before his death Amaral had been threatened after accusing 16 of the 20 state judges of crimes including prostitution and drug trafficking. Scandals add to president's woes. Meanwhile, the scandals are further weakening the president's shrinking support. Brazilians now view Cardoso as one of the worst presidents in recent history, worse than Collor de Mello, who resigned amid a corruption scandal and impeachment process.

Another cause of the president's unpopularity is unemployment, considered by half the 180 million people in Brazil as the principal problem in the country. Although the causes may be complex, the effects have been disastrous. Polling agency Vox Populi released a poll Sept. 13 showing that Cardoso's approval rating fell to 8% from 12% in the previous poll in August. "Brazilians get tired of everything, and now they're tired of Cardoso. It's really a pity, but it's kind of a curse," said Euripedes Alcantara, news editor at the weekly magazine *Veja*. [Sources: The Financial Times (London), 09/18/99; Inter Press Service, The New York Times, 09/22/99; Clarin (Argentina), 10/04/99; Reuters, 10/05/99; Spanish news service EFE, 09/09/99, 09/21/99, 10/06/99; The Financial Times (London), 10/07/99]

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