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Brazil Delcares New Amazonian Reserve

by LADB Staff
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The murder of a US-born nun in the Brazilian state of Para has led to the deployment of troops to the Amazon, a decree ordering an Amazonian reserve, and an international outcry. Within days of the killing of Dorothy Stang, police had taken into custody three of the four suspects and had retrieved one of the weapons used for the crime. But violent death continued to haunt the landless and environmental movements, as several murders quickly followed Stang’s.

The murder of Stang forced President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to cut short an international trip and attempt to militarize the region, although the question of whether military deployment would bring order to the region remained unanswered.

Stang becomes “martyr” for Amazon

Dorothy Stang, 73, a nun from Dayton, Ohio, and a naturalized Brazilian citizen, was shot dead on Feb. 12, a result of a dispute with an influential rancher in the eastern Amazon state of Para, on the country's frontier of forest and development, where powerful interests collide with the Amazon's poor.

Witnesses said Stang was killed because she was trying to halt logging in an area of near-pristine jungle coveted by rancher Vitalmiro Goncalves de Moura, known as Bida. Police were searching for Moura but think he fled the region in a small plane after the killing.

As of Feb. 22, an attorney for Moura said the rancher was negotiating his surrender and would turn himself in to police shortly. Police already had the three other suspects in custody. Amair Freijoli da Cunha is accused of hiring the killers, and Rayfran das Neves Sales confessed to firing twice at Stang.
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Another suspect in the case, Uilquelano de Souza Pinto, known as Eduardo, was apprehended in eastern Para. Cunha, who was charged with conspiracy to murder, has denied any involvement. An autopsy performed in Belem determined that Stang had been shot six times in the head, throat, and abdomen.

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Claudio Guimaraes, director of the state's forensics institute, said the shots appeared to have been fired from just over a half meter away. Witnesses who escaped the killers said Stang pulled out her Bible when confronted by the killers and began to read passages to them before they shot her. "My only weapon is the Bible," said Sister Dorothy, according to the campesinos who witnessed the murder.

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Just 10 days before, Stang had said that assailants would not have the courage to kill a woman of her age. "I know they want to kill me, but I won't flee," Stang told the newspaper O Estado de Sao Paulo. "But if they do kill me, I would like to be buried here in Anapu, with the humble people." Thousands of people, from peasants to politicians, converged on the remote Amazon town for the burial of the nun killed in the struggle to protect the Amazon rain forest and its poor residents from loggers and ranchers. After an all-night vigil, mourners filed slowly past the simple, flag-draped coffin in the small shingle-roofed church in Anapu, the jungle town of 7,000 residents that Stang had adopted as her own.
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Comparisons to Chico Mendes

"Before she came here, she was in southern Para, where loggers cut down everything, and she saw that that model brought disgrace for many and improvements for only a few," said Felicio Pontes Jr., a federal prosecutor who often worked with Stang on land issues. "She vowed not to let that happen here." That vow cost Stang her life and made her a symbol for rain-forest defenders. Her killing drew repeated comparisons to rubber tapper and environmentalist Chico Mendes, who was slain in 1988 (see Chronicle, 1989-03-28; NotiSur, 1993-02-23 and 1996-08-02). While Mendes' death brought international attention, increased environmental awareness, and government regulations, much has remained the same.

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The Amazon is still a wild, mostly lawless region. Loggers, ranchers, and developers are still cutting down the trees about 20% of the 2.7 million sq km wilderness already has been destroyed. An
estimated 15,756 sq km of the Amazon rain forest was cut down in 2003, the last year for which
government figures are available. Like Mendes, Stang preached living in harmony with the
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"Dorothy would call up all the government agencies and demand this and that, and when they'd
hang up on her she'd go to Belem [the state capital] or Brasilia and knock on their doors. She'd even
open up their file cabinets," said Claudia Marcia Cavalcante, an agricultural technician with the
farming cooperative formed by Stang. Stang's success earned her the hostility of local ranchers, who
were used to grabbing whatever land they wanted, using forged deeds or no deeds at all. "They
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Stang's murder was followed by four others in the region. Among those killed was a 31-year-old rural laborer, Jailton da Silva Lago, who was found dead of bullet wounds the night of Feb. 16, the fourth victim in as many days. He was found in Assurini, 40 km from Altamira, Para. A human rights group representative said the murder demonstrated the "chaos" that exists in the region.

Daniel Soares da Costa Filho, ex-president of the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais de Paraupebas, was found dead in southern Para on Feb. 15, shot six times while riding a motorcycle on the road to his rural property. Police said he was one of two people who had been threatened by loggers, but they were not yet sure if there was a connection between his death and Stang's.

Shortly after Stang's murder, the Catholic organization Comissao Pastoral da Terra (CPT) released a list of 161 people who had been threatened with death because of agrarian conflicts. The CPT said the killing and threats exposed "the absurd rural structure that concentrates lands in large properties." The CPT said more than 100 killings related to land conflicts had occurred in the past two years, with 73 people killed in the countryside in 2003, 33 of whom were in Para, and last year at least 30 died.
CPT president Bishop Tomas Balduino, together with Xingu Bishop Erwin Krautler, said in a press release that owners of "latifundios, wearing the mask of agrobusiness and modernity, want to maintain their basic structure because that guarantees the maintenance of their hegemony and their privileges over the Brazilian state." The CPT went on to say that "ranchers, loggers, and soy planters, covered by the discourse of productivity, are advancing over public lands and are promoting the destruction of the lands and the devastation of the forests."

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The head of Brazil's environment agency (Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renovaveis, IBAMA) said the destruction of the rain forest would slow down since Stang's murder had prompted the government to launch an unprecedented crackdown on illegal loggers and ranchers. Brazil created a vast environmental reserve and sent its army and federal police to fight deforestation following the international outrage at Stang's murder.

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Amazon deforestation reached its second-highest level in 2003 during the first year of President Lula’s presidency. It rose again in 2004, according to preliminary government figures, as loggers and farmers used a jungle highway to push deeper into the rain forest. Brazil’s government says it wants to curb Amazon destruction and the land battles harming its image abroad and turning vast swathes of forest into useless, semi-desert regions. But Lula does not want to hurt economic growth or stoke violence with outright bans on farming and logging on illegally occupied federal lands areas with multiple ownership claims after decades of unauthorized subdivisions and sales. Lula’s solution is a plan to create a new federal presence on the Amazon frontier with 19 bases from which IBAMA, army, and police units will legalize forest use and enforce controls.

"What's new is that the cooperation between the army, IBAMA, and federal agencies is permanent," said Krieger. "IBAMA often arrives in a helicopter and we're shot at and we flee, but this isn't going to happen anymore with the army," said Krieger of plans for IBAMA units to travel in army helicopters with jungle-warfare units. Lula has frozen new logging and farming in a protected area three times the size of Belgium adjacent to jungle highway BR163 while authorities confirm what activities are legal.

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