

13 Years Later Brazilian Journalist's Murderer Still Unpunished

Contributed by Newsroom
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The IAPA (Inter American Press Association) called on newspaper readers throughout the Americas to add their signatures to an open letter to be sent to Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, urging him to act to have the August 29, 1995 murder of Reinaldo Coutinho da Silva, editor of the São Gonzalo, Rio de Janeiro, newspaper Cachoeiras Jornal, solved.

Now more than 13 years since the crime, it continues to go unpunished, despite its having been declared a priority by the police.

Internal differences in the Public Prosecutor's Office, which is investigating the case, have prevented the proceedings from moving ahead. No suspect has been arrested.

Given this state of affairs, the IAPA has submitted the case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). Through ads published in some 400 newspapers in the Western Hemisphere, the IAPA is inviting readers to go to the Web site <http://www.impunidad.com> and join its campaign titled "Let's Put an End to Impunity."

The initiative has received the support of nearly 20,000 signatories to a letter that month to month is sent to the authorities concerned, demanding greater effort in police and judicial inquiries and harsh punishment for the guilty.

The program is funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

Following several years of investigations and after all local legal and judicial resources had been exhausted - one of the requirements for cases to be eligible for submission to the inter-American human rights organization - the IAPA concluded that the murder of Reinaldo Coutinho da Silva, murdered on August 29, 1995, remains completely unpunished and argued that "Articles 4 (right to life), 8 and 25 (right to have access to justice) and 13 (right to freedom of expression) of the American Convention on Human Rights were violated."

Da Silva was the editor of the newspaper Cachoeiras Jornal in Cachoeiras de Macacu, Rio de Janeiro, and wrote for the daily Nosso Jornal in São Gonçalo. He was shot 14 times at 7:30 am on the morning of August 29, 1995 while stopped at a traffic light on Edson Avenue in the São Gonçalo neighborhood of Lindo Parque.

Just before he was killed da Silva mentioned to family members that he sensed he was being followed. At one point he even called the police about a pickup truck that was parked in front of his home for several hours.

The driver of the vehicle took off after apparently being alerted by the sound of the siren of an approaching police patrol car. The incident was not recorded by the police, according to the family.

The day he was killed he was on his way to a meeting of the São Gonçalo Investigations, Studies and Development Institute (Ipedesg), a civic organization he and other members of the local community founded to discuss and seek solutions to municipal problems. That day the group was to meet and talk about the issue of violence with special guest State Security Chief Nilton Cerqueira.

Although the authorities considered various theories the crime was never solved and remains unpunished. Eye-witnesses disappeared and one of the suspects, in custody in connection with another crime, was later released. Other persons believed to have been witnesses were not interviewed by investigators.

From 1997 to date, as part of its Anti-Impunity and Unpunished Crimes project, the IAPA has submitted 20 cases of journalists' murders to the IACHR; 11 have been admitted (4 concerning Brazil, 3 concerning Colombia, 2 Guatemala and 2 Mexico).

As a result, some cases are under negotiation with the respective governments to reopen investigations and legal procedures; others are negotiating financial reparations to victims' families and in others legislative measures to combat impunity are on the table.