

Death Squad Threatens Lawyers in Brazil

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Two lawyers and an NGO leader in Brazil have suffered death threats and intimidation which appear to be linked to their work to bring two alleged "death squad" members to justice. Amnesty International believes their lives are in danger.

Isabel Peres is the Coordinator of the Brazilian branch of the NGO ACAT (Christian Association for the Abolition of Torture). Together with lawyers Francisco Lúcio França and José de Jesus Filho, she has been involved in the prosecution of two police officers, who are accused of the murder of two youths.

The trial took place in Mongaguá municipality, on the southern coast of São Paulo state, from 21-23 March. At the end of the first day of the trial, two cars followed Francisco Lúcio França and José de Jesus Filho to the place where they were staying. On March 26, another car followed Isabel Peres to the place where she was staying.

On March 25, Francisco Lúcio França was out with two friends in a shopping center in the center of São Paulo. A man approached him and said he was a police officer called "Lúcio", a member of a "grupo de extermínio" (death squad) which "fazia o serviço sujo da Polícia" (carried out the dirty work of the police).

He told França, "Você pare com o processo, se não você morre! (You should drop this case, or else you will die!) and went on to say that he had come to São Paulo to "identificar" (identify) two people.

It was clear from what "Lúcio" said that he was talking about the prosecution of the two police officers, who had been acquitted two days earlier.

The public prosecutor's case has lodged an appeal against the acquittal. Key witnesses to the murder are now believed to be in particular danger: like the police officers who are now free, they live in Mongaguá, where the murders took place.

The police officers are accused of murdering 16-year-old Anderson do Carmo and 20-year-old Celso Gioelli Magalhães Júnior, on September 27, 2002.

The two young men were visiting a bar in Mongaguá, when two police officers, who had threatened them earlier, called to them to get into their police car. They tried to escape, but the police caught them, and witnesses saw the officers beat them severely.

The officers took them away in the car, saying they were taking them for questioning at the municipal police station. However, their bodies were found a few days later in a shallow grave.

A bullet was found in each body, which were identified as having been fired from the gun of one of the police officers. Further evidence implicated the second police officer. The two officers were dismissed from the Military Police and charged with the killings.

Across Brazil, "death squads" carry out extrajudicial executions of criminal suspects, in situations sometimes known as "social cleansing", and are also involved in organized crime: among them are serving and former police officers.

There have been some successful crackdowns on "death squad" activity, notably in the state of Bahia. However, at least 30 people were killed in Rio's Baixada Fluminense district on 31 March in two hours of indiscriminate shooting by "death squad" members, believed to include military police officers.

The attack is believed to have been a response to a crackdown on "death squads" and corruption within Rio's Military

Police force.

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