

Brazilian Bishop Caught with Suitcases Stuffed with US\$ 8 Million

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The Brazilian federal police arrested Monday a Congressman and several members of the Universal Church who were about to take off in a private plane from Brasília airport carrying luggage stuffed with millions of US dollars.

Acting on an anonymous tip, police went to a hangar at Brasília's airport and searched the aircraft that was about to carry conservative Liberal Front Party Deputy, PFL, João Batista Ramos da Silva and several other clergy people to Goiânia, capital of the central state of Goiás.

Reliable police sources said that the seven suitcases contained the equivalent of US\$ 8 million in cash.

Mr. Ramos da Silva who is also a bishop in the evangelical Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (Universal Church of the Kingdom of God), confessed to the police the cash came from church faithful' tithe. Universal Church is known for its luxurious temples and extensive media holdings.

The arrests occur at a very sensitive moment for Brazilian public opinion that has been shell shocked by several weeks of bribes and money scandals revelations involving the ruling Workers Party of president Lula da Silva.

Actually José Adalberto Vieira da Silva, an aide to former PT's president José Genoíno (he resigned his post immediately after the scandal), was arrested last Friday at São Paulo airport when he was unable to explain the origin of almost US\$ 200,000 he was carrying in hand luggage and stuffed in his underwear.

A month ago, deputy Roberto Jefferson, president from the PTB party, a close ally of the ruling coalition revealed that the Workers Party had mounted an organization to bribe Congress members in support of government legislation which was paid with money milked from government managed companies.

President Lula has promised to get to the bottom of the matter and fire all those involved and has since begun a reshuffling of the cabinet trying to distance himself from the Workers Party.

Among opposition parties, none has been more aggressive than PFL in attempting to capitalize the government's weakness, but has now been caught red-handed.

In Brazil transporting important amounts of money is not illegal, but the origin and destination must be reported.

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