

5 Witnesses Have Been Killed in Brazilian Case. Maria Aparecida May Be Next.

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Maria Aparecida Denadai, a lawyer working in the state of Espírito Santo, in the Brazilian southeast, has received death threats. It is feared that these threats may be linked to the killing of her brother, lawyer Marcelo Denadai, in 2002.

Maria Aparecida's brother was killed as he was preparing to reveal evidence on political corruption in Espírito Santo state. Maria Aparecida Denadai may be in grave danger.

Since the assassination of Marcelo Denadai on April 15, 2002, five witnesses in the case have been killed. Maria Aparecida Denadai, one of the remaining witnesses, received death threats in 2002 following public denunciations of the police investigation into the killing.

Federal police protection provided at the time was withdrawn in December 2004. Since the withdrawal of protection measures, Maria Aparecida Denadai claims that she has been repeatedly threatened and intimidated.

She states that she has received several threatening messages from a man suspected of ordering the killing of her brother. Two men claiming to be military police officers reportedly tried to enter her home, claiming that they had information about the death of her brother.

They were later identified as former military police officers who had been charged with homicide. In December 2005, she avoided an apparent attempt on her life when an armed man reportedly entered the office where she works, before being escorted from the building.

In January 2006, Maria Aparecida Denadai reported that her car was followed by two men on a motorcycle, who only left her when she stopped outside a police station. All these incidents have been reported to the federal police.

Several state and national investigations have linked human rights violations, "death squad" activity, corruption, organized crime and attacks against human rights defenders in the state to the police organization Scuderie Detetive le Cocq (SDLC), which was reportedly acting in conjunction with powerful political and economic groups in the state.

Though SDLC was outlawed by a federal judicial ruling in November 2004, it is believed that many of its former members continue to be active in the state's police forces and in political office.

Following her visit to Brazil in September-October 2003 the UN Special Rapporteur on Extra-Judicial Executions wrote in her final report that "The situation in...Espírito Santo is a particularly striking example of the penetration of death squad activities into the highest levels of legislative, judicial and executive branches of a state."

In 2002, a national human rights commission headed by the Minister of Justice recommended that the federal government should intervene in Espírito Santo. The recommendation was rejected by the Federal Attorney General following discussions with Fernando Henrique Cardoso who was then the Brazilian President.

Instead a joint investigation of federal and state authorities began into systemic human rights violations, organized crime and impunity. This led to the detention of several leading figures involved in organized crime, including politicians, senior police officers and even judges.

In 2003, newly-elected President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva promised to continue the fight against organized crime and human rights violations in the state. However, the persistent failure to conclude major homicide investigations and protect witnesses, coupled with the recent information of the illegal bugging of a major news outlet in the state, have increased concerns that state and federal efforts to combat organized crime have dwindled.

The recent replacement of people heading state and federal investigative teams is also believed to have undermined this process.

In March 2003 Judge Alexandre Martins de Castro Filho was killed following his investigation into allegations that detainees in the prison system were being temporarily released to commit assassinations.

According to Amnesty International nobody has yet been brought to trial for his killing, nor for the killing of Marcelo Denadai, perpetuating the long history of impunity surrounding the deaths of those fighting against human rights violations and corruption in Espírito Santo.

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