

Brazilian Journalist Goes into Hiding After Report on Human Body Traffic

Contributed by José Wilson Miranda
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Reporters Without Borders (RSF), an organization headquartered in Paris, which fights for freedom of the press around the world, has announced this Monday, August 21, that Brazilian journalist Maria Mazzei went on hiding since August 15.

She decided to skip town when threats to her life became too hard for her to handle. The threats started after the Rio daily O Dia published a series of articles by her, denouncing a Mafia specialized in stealing and selling human bodies.

Reporters without Borders says that it is dismayed with the threats made against Mazzei and her family. The menacing calls started after the publication of a series of articles in which employees from Rio's coroner's office were accused of selling corpses to a bodies Mafia.

In a message released in Portuguese, the RSF states, "We are deeply worried with these repeated acts of violence against Brazilian journalists who conduct inquiries on "delicate" cases and even more so, after Maria Mazzei was forced into hiding due to these threats."

The statement goes on to urge Brazilian authorities to identify as quick as possible the authors of the intimidation. They also ask the state to react in face of the violence so that journalists can work without fear.

The RSF also reminds that Mazzei's vanishing act is happening 48 hours since Guilherme Portanova, a reporter from Globo TV was returned after being kidnapped for two days by a prison-gang called PCC (First Command of the Capital).

The kidnapers demanded - and the demand was met - that the TV station broadcast a video blasting the "inhumane conditions" in which inmates have to live inside Brazilian prisons.

Maria Mazzei, a reporter from O Dia, wrote several pieces on the "Bodies Mafia", revealing that corpses were being stolen to be used in schemes against insurance companies.

On August 12, the reporter interviewed Yusef Georges Sarkis, 52, a former officer from the Merchant Navy, who is charged with having simulated his own death to receive about 1 million reais (US\$ 468,000) in life insurance. In the recorded interview Sarkis said that he knew kidnapers and policemen who were friends of his.

The telephone threats started as soon as the article came out. Also a suspicious car was seen driving past Mazzei's house repeatedly. Concerned with the development of the situation, the newspaper called authorities and told them what was happening. And as a precaution moved Mazzei and her family to an undisclosed place.

On Monday, August 15, O Dia sent a letter to Roberto Precioso, Rio's Security Secretary: "The newspaper took all the measures it could, but security matters are a state concern and it's the duty of the state to guarantee constant protection to Maria Mazzei and her family, until the criminals involved in this case are arrested and brought to Justice."

Precioso responded by saying that the threats could no be tolerated and that the police were intent on identifying those responsible for the menacing calls and acts.

It's believed that there are many people interested in silencing the reporter including employees from Rio's coroner's office as well as undertakers and specialists in plots against insurance companies.