

Brazil: 11 Years After Police Massacre of 19 Landless Nobody Has Been Punished

Contributed by Nina Fideles
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Brazilians just commemorated the 11th anniversary of the Massacre at Eldorado dos Carajás on April 17, 2006. On this day, 19 rural workers were assassinated in the state of Pará, in northern Brazil. Under the order of then governor Almir Gabriel and under the command of Major José Maria Pereira and Colonel Collares Pantoja, 155 military police circled a group of landless workers who were marching for agrarian reform and opened fire.

Of the 144 who were incriminated, only the two commanding officers were found guilty, and they are roaming freely as they await their appeal. Both of their cases are paralyzed in superior courts.

According to Marco Aurélio Nascimento, the public prosecutor for the case, it is just another instance of impunity: "We lament this mentality on the part of Brazilian court officials, who think that a person can eternally appeal a case and never go to jail.

"This does not happen in other countries. Only in Brazil, unfortunately. The mentality is that persons have this right to appeal, which is called presumed innocence, but is translated as what? Total and absolute impunity."

In 2002, through a decree of then president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, April 17th became the National Day of Struggle for Agrarian Reform. Along with the Massacre at Carandiru (1992) and the Shooting at Candelária (1993), the Massacre of Eldorado dos Carajás is considered one of the most brutal police actions in recent Brazilian history.

What Happened

The autopsy at the time showed that many of the dead had been beaten up and killed in cold blood by the police. Members of the Movement of the Rural Landless families (MST), to which the assassinated belonged, denounced that the police hid the bodies of women and children killed in the attack on the landless group.

Around mid-day on April 17 approximately 1200 landless people blocked highway PA 150. The highway links the state capital, Belém, with the south of the state. The group was one of several groups of landless families which has occupied unused land to put pressure on the government to carry out an agrarian reform.

The MST had arranged a meeting for that day with the head of INCRA (the federal government land agency) in Pará, Valter Cardoso, in Marabá. The state government as part of the agreement had undertaken to send 50 buses to transport the landless people to the meeting. The buses were not sent.

Two days previously (April 15) the Governor of Pará, Almir Gabriel, his secretary for security, Paulo Sette Camara and the general commander of the military police in the state, Fabiano Lopes, had a meeting to discuss the proposed blockage of the highway by the landless.

At the meeting it was decided that no concessions would be given to the landless. The local commander of the military police, Mário Colares Pantoja, was ordered personally by Governor Gabriel to free the highway.

Military police surrounded the landless from the front and from behind. At approximately 5 pm the police attacked with tear-gas. The landless responded by hurling stones and work implements at the police who opened fire with machine guns. Many of the landless took refuge in nearby wooded areas but were sought out by the police.

In all, the police operation lasted approximately an hour. Official figures claimed that 19 landless had been assassinated by the police and there a further 45 - 41 landless and 4 military police were injured.

Initially the autopsies were carried out by two forensic doctors from Belém and by a team of the local police experts. Human rights groups insisted that they should be redone by Dr. Nelson Massini from São Paulo. After initial resistance to the idea at local level, officials from the federal government intervened and Dr. Massini carried out another autopsy.

His findings were devastating. In the case of at least 7 of the victims he found clear indications that they were executed in cold blood. "It is too much. There are cases which clearly show that the victims were dominated and killed with their own work implements such as knives and sickles. There are two cases of bullets from behind, one in the neck which indicates that they were executed" commented Dr. Massini.

According to Massini, the majority of the bullets were lodged in the thorax and heads of the victims and claimed that "this shows that the shots fired were not meant to intimidate but to kill people".

An example is that of assassinated MST leader Oziel Lima. Many witnesses testify that 17 year old Oziel was alive after the police operation on the highway. TV reporter Marina Romão guarantees that he and approximately 50 other people took refuge in a hut where she also had hidden when the police opened fire.

"I saw them (the police) dragging Oziel out onto the highway. They beat him, they called him a 'good for nothing' and made him shout 'long live the landless movement'". Yet the autopsy results show that Oziel who was alive after the police operation was shot in the head at close range - in other words he was assassinated in cold blood by the military police.

The initial official response was of condemnation of the violence and of the police. President Fernando Henrique Cardoso declared that what happened was "unjustifiable" and went on to state that he was convinced that those responsible would be punished. The President's remarks were in large part a response to international protest which began to pour into Brazil hours after the landless were assassinated - CNN carried news reports of the massacre soon after it took place.

President Cardoso promised agility on the part of the government to pass law projects already in parliament to speed up agrarian reform. On Monday April 22 he held a meeting with the presidents of the Congress, the Senate and of the Supreme Court to speed up the passing into law of these projects. Initially there seemed to be sufficient political support amongst parliamentarians to pass the laws quickly.

However, by mid week it was obvious that conservative interests in both houses of parliament, would block the passing of laws favoring agrarian reform. In a move which seems not to be linked to the massacre, Agriculture Minister Andrade Vieira resigned on April 19.

His ministry had been responsible for the agrarian reform question. Indications at the moment are that a special ministry for agrarian reform will be established. The names of the likely candidates to head the ministry leaked to the press so far have not the support of groups who defend the urgent necessity of an agrarian reform in the country.

In Brazil, religious funeral services for the dead usually take place on the seventh day after the death. Such services were scheduled for April 24 and turned into an act of protest throughout the country.

The Conference of Catholic Bishops of Brazil (CNBB) at its annual meeting during the week decided that a mass would be celebrated in all the Catholic churches in the country on this date as a way not only to remember the assassinated but to protest the violence.

A message of condemnation of the assassination arrived from the Pope for the occasion. All over the country the religious act became a protest. For example, thousands participated in an ecumenical religious celebration in Sao Paulo after a march through the city center.

Here the leadership of the MST blamed President Cardoso, Governor Gabriel and Minister for Justice, Nelson Jobim for the bloodshed. Calls were made for the resignation of the Minister Jobim.

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