

Brazilian TV Cameraman Gunned Down. Drug Trafficker Is Main Suspect

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Brazilian TV cameraman Walter Lessa de Oliveira was murdered on Saturday, January 5, Maceió, the capital of the northeastern state of Alagoas, amid a disturbing crime wave in the city. Witnesses say he was gunned down by a drug trafficker and revenge appears to be the most likely motive.

Aged 53 and employed by TV Assembléia, a public TV service operated by the Alagoas state assembly, Lessa was shot four times in the head while at a bus stop on the outskirts of Maceió.

Citing several witnesses, the police have identified a drug trafficker known by the nickname of "Aranha" (Spider) as the killer. Aranha allegedly pulled up in a car alongside Lessa and fired four shots at him. Hit in the head, Lessa died immediately.

The most plausible theory is that the shooting was in revenge for the fact Lessa had in the past filmed footage of Aranha that was shown on state television. An alternative theory that has been suggested is that Lessa was shot while resisting an attempted robbery, but this is not supported by the witness statements taken by the police, and nothing was stolen from him.

Born near Rio de Janeiro, Lessa used to head the Alagoas Union of Professional Journalists and worked for TV Gazeta for more than 20 years. Of late, he had worked for the Maceió Center for Higher Education as well as TV Assembléia.

His death came amid a surge in armed crime in Maceió in which a total of 16 people were murdered in the city from 5 to 7 January. The state police have been on strike for five months for more pay and the authorities seem powerless to deal with the crime wave.

Press freedom organization Reporters Without Border released a note saying it was appalled by the crime. "Brazil's northeast continues to be a high-risk region for journalists," the group wrote and added:

"Without trying to anticipate the results of the investigation, we think it quite plausible that this was an act of revenge by a drug trafficker, especially as organized crime is so active there. We hope the leading suspect will be quickly found and questioned. We also hope that the alarming security situation in Alagoas will be quickly resolved."