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## Brazil's Christian Church Loses First 5 of About 100 Lawsuits Against Press

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Brazil's largest daily newspaper, Folha de S. Paulo, won two more court victories this past week against the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus - IURD), one of Brazil's most influential evangelical churches, which has launched around 60 lawsuits against the daily in a total of 20 states.

The newspaper already won five of these cases, which were prompted by an article in December about the church's sizable assets. The actions have all been brought by individual members of the church, who claim the article "offended" their religious sentiments.

One of the two latest cases was in Tarauacá, in the western Amazonian state of Acre, where judge Romário Divino Faria ruled that IURD member Cléber Andrade dos Santos "was not offended on an individual basis."

In Cianorte, in the southern state of Paraná, judge Fabiano Berbel dismissed the suit brought by Jackson Luis Gonçalves.

Two other daily newspapers, the Rio de Janeiro-based Extra and the Salvador, Bahia-based A Tarde, have meanwhile been the target of 40 lawsuits over their reports of a case in which an IURD member profaned images in a Catholic church in the northeastern state of Bahia.

All these lawsuits have been brought under a 1967 press law under which journalists can be imprisoned for defamation and insulting comments. Inherited from the former military dictatorship, the law has effectively lapsed.

Federal supreme court judge Carlos Ayres Britto suspended application of 20 of its 77 articles on February 21 in a ruling issued independently of the IURD lawsuits.

His decision, which is awaiting confirmation by the court in a plenary session, could speed the adoption of a bill presented in December by federal parliamentarian Miro Teixeira that would completely overturn the provisions of the 1967 law.

France-based international press freedom organization, Reporters Without Borders said that it welcomes the latest rulings in favor of Folha de S. Paulo and, like Brazil's journalists' organizations, expressed its hope that the Teixeira bill will be quickly debated and adopted.

Reporters Without Border has condemned what it calls "harassment" of three journalists and their newspapers by followers of the Universal Church.

### National Intimidation

Folha de S. Paulo and one of its reporters, Elvira Lobato, are facing about 60 individual suits filed in more than 20 of the country's states after the journalist wrote about the church's finances.

The Rio de Janeiro daily Extra and its editor, Bruno Thys, and the Salvador de Bahia (northeastern Brazil) daily A Tarde and one of its reporters, Valmar Hupsel Filho, have had 40 suits filed against them for reporting that a IURD member defiled a Catholic religious image.

"Press freedom allows anyone to respond to what they consider defamation, but such a concerted legal campaign is different from normal defense," Reporters Without Borders said.

"Why has the IURD not filed a single lawsuit against each paper? The mass individual litigation looks like concerted harassment of the media. A religious argument is also not valid in the suit against Folha de S. Paulo. We declare our support for the three newspapers."

Lobato reported in Folha de S. Paulo last 15 December about the hugely-wealthy IURD's links with tax havens. She did not name any church member or discuss its doctrines. But some 50 IURD members said their religious beliefs were "insulted" and each filed a lawsuit.

The paper says the scattering of the cases over many states all at the same time makes an effective defense impossible. The judiciary has rejected the papers' request for the suits to be merged into one.

The 35 complaints filed against A Tarde and Hupsel Filho and the five against Thys and Extra follow reports in the two papers last December of the defiling of a Catholic image in a Salvador de Bahia church.

The IURD says the reports amounted to "incitement to hatred" of its followers. The IURD TV station TV Record attacked the daily O Globo this month (February 17) for calling the IURD a sect. The station screened a photo of Lobato.

Brazilian journalists have backed the three papers. Brazil's President, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, said on February 19 that "press freedom means the press can write what it likes but also allows those who think they have been wronged to take

legal action to prove their innocence."

## Press Association Sounds Off

On February 20, the Inter American Press Association (IAPA) expressed concern at all these lawsuits filed against Brazilian news media, saying it suspected the action could be intended to stop the press from doing investigative reporting and instead resort to self-censorship.

It called on the courts in the South American country to "give precedence to freedom of the press and the people's right to know above any particular interest."

IAPA President, Earl Maucker, declared, "Apart from the respect that we must have for every citizen's right to resort to the courts when he or she feels offended by a report, in this particular case - and given the context - we strongly suspect that what is involved is a maneuver aimed at intimidation and restricting freedom of expression."

Gonzalo Marroquín, chairman of the IAPA's Committee on Freedom of the Press and Information, added, "We are witnessing an unprecedented effort to force newspapers to expend extraordinary expense and time defending themselves; what they really want is to buy their silence."

Maucker, editor and senior vice president of the Fort Lauderdale, Florida, newspaper Sun-Sentinel, and Marroquín, editor of Prensa Libre in Guatemala City, Guatemala, issued a public call on the Brazilian courts to consider the context of what was happening and give precedence to freedom of the press and the public's right to know above any personal or interest group.

The newspaper Folha de S. Paulo and reporter Elvira Lobato had 50 lawsuits claiming pain and suffering filed against them following the December 15 publication of a report headlined "Universal celebrates its 30th birthday as a business empire" - a reference to the properties and big businesses that the religious group amassed over its three-decades-long existence.

Another 36 lawsuits seeking punitive damages were filed in dozens of cities against the Salvador newspaper A Tarde and its reporter Valmar Hupsel Filho following the December 3 publication of a report on the destruction of a Catholic image by a member of the church.

Another report on this incident by the newspaper Extra, a member of the Globo chain in Rio de Janeiro, led to five lawsuits being brought against that paper and its news editor, Bruno Thys, by pastors of the evangelical church.