
Acquittal of Brazilian Man Accused of Ordering US Nun Killing Called Provocation

Contributed by Gisele Barbieri
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The Brazilian Justice in the state of Pará acquitted the rancher Vitalmiro Bastos de Moura, also known as Bida, who was accused of having ordered the assassination of the American missionary Dorothy Stang. The decision was made by the jury, on May 6, with five votes to two.

The acquittal continues to provoke indignation. "I am very disappointed, but I respect the Brazilian State and the opinion of the jury," affirmed David Stang, brother of Dorothy, who came from the United States.

For the lawyer of the Brazilian CPT (Pastoral Land Commission), José Batista Afonso, the decision represented a "provocation for crime". According to him, there was enough proof for condemning Bida.

The lawyer affirmed that "no new fact was added since the first judgment" which occurred in 2007. On that occasion, the rancher was sentenced to 30 years in prison. Bida has been in prison since March of 2005, and he only had the right to a new trial because it was his first offense and the sentence exceeded 20 years.

The reversal in this case was provoked by the change in testimony of the gunman Rayfran das Neves, accused of having executed the assassination. In the beginning, he had argued that he had killed Dorothy on the orders of Bida, who had given him the weapon used in the crime.

But on May 6, Rayfran changed his testimony and assumed individual responsibility for the homicide, affirming that there had been no one ordering him to do it.

For the accusation, this testimony was essential for the reversal of the case. The prosecutor Edson de Souza will appeal the decision. In his closing remarks, the prosecutor said that the missionary, "who was so persecuted in life" was "being insulted in death". The prosecutor maintained the accusation of aggravated homicide against Moura.

He affirmed that the crime was committed as a result of a promise of payment. And he reported to the court that his family was receiving threats for him to stop the process. "These threats, made through anonymous phone calls, have been going on for about a year," said Souza.

In 2005, after being jailed, Rayfran had confessed to the Federal Police that the rancher Bida had offered him 10,000 reais (US\$ 6,098) if he would assume sole responsibility for the crime and clear the name of Amair Feijoli da Cunha, supposed intermediary of the rancher Bida.

One of the arguments used by the defense in the new trial was that the accused was being persecuted as a result of pressure from the media, the government, and international NGOs. The lawyer Eduardo Imbiriba even accused Dorothy of inciting violence in the region of Anapu, where the missionary was assassinated.

The death of the sister has had international repercussions and has become a landmark of Brazilian agrarian conflict. Dorothy, a defender of human rights who worked in the area of agrarian conflicts, was killed by gunshots in Anapu, 300 kilometers from the capital of Pará, on February 12, 2005. The American missionary had worked with the social movements in Pará for 40 years.

More Death Threats

Three hundred people who live in the interior of the state of Pará are being threatened with death for having denounced cases of human trafficking, sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, and pedophilia.

The number was announced by the bishop of the Diocese of Ilha de Marajó in Pará, Dom José Luiz Azcona, in an extraordinary meeting of the Council for the Defense of the Rights of Human Beings (CDDPH). He is one of the four religious figures threatened with death in the state.

Azcona affirmed that the government of Pará, despite knowing this figure, still has not taken measures for reducing these incidences. "I do not worry as much about my own personal security. If there are 300 men and women marked by death, this indicates a society that is sick, poor, and dying," he criticized.

According to the bishop, barely 100 of those threatened by death are under the protection of the federal government. "There has to be a change in mentality, a conversion. It is necessary to look at the Amazon as the Amazon is, not with the eyes of Brasília."

The bishop further added that there is knowledge of and tacit approval by the local authorities in cases of "prostitution, trafficking and consumption of drugs, and the use of alcoholic beverages among youth."

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