

THE OBSERVATORY
for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

a joint programme



PRESS RELEASE

BRAZIL: Stigmatisation of the MST and its members

Paris-Geneva, July 8, 2008. *The Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, a joint programme of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), and Justiça Global express their deepest concern about the harassment by the Public Ministry of Rio Grande do Sul against members and leaders of the Landless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra - MST), a movement active in the rights to land, assimilating them to, inter alia, “criminals” and elements “threatening the society and national security”.*

On June 17, 2008, a ruling was issued by the judge of Carazinho ordering the expulsion of the inhabitants of two settlements, although these territories had been granted by landowners to the landless families. The landowners were further threatened with fines if they carried on “supporting the MST”. As a result, hundreds of families of landless workers were expelled by 500 members of the military brigade of the State. These families sought refuge along the BR-386 road close to Sarandi, in the State of Rio Grande do Sul, where they were again threatened with eviction.

The June-17 ruling follows the complaint brought by two civil servants of the Public Ministry of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, Messrs. Luis Felipe de Aguiar Tasheiner and Benhur Biancon Junior, on June 16, 2008, demanding the evacuation of the two settlements on the grounds that these places were “operational bases for criminal actions”, which were “causing enormous loss to the landowners and the society”. These allegations were the result of an enquiry carried out upon decision of the High Council of the Public Ministry of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, on the grounds that the MST could threaten national security¹. The methods used for the enquiry were reportedly inspired by those of the Brazilian intelligence agency.

The complaint alleged that books of Chico Mendes and Che Guevara were found in some of the premises of the settlement, which was evidence of an increasing ideology of radicalisation among the members of the MST. The complaint also questioned the principle of allocation of the public funding of NGOs, including the MST, which was accused of embezzlement.

The complaint further relied upon two reports of the secret services of the military brigade:

- the most recent one, dated June 2, 2006, alleges that settlements can be maintained thanks to the federal public funding, to international aid and to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC*), which influence, amongst others, the MST that would plan to create a “free State” on the Brazilian territory and that would have reached the “execution phase” of its strategy aiming at emancipating the territory from the control of the authorities.
- an older document considers the MST as a revolutionary movement threatening public order.

¹ On December 3, 2007, the High Council decided, *inter alia*:

- to promote the lodging of a complaint aiming at the dissolution of the MST and at declaring the association illegal.
- to take legal steps to avoid marches and other activities of the MST.
- to enquire on the members living in settlements and on their leaders as regards acts of organised crime and mismanagement of public funds.

The Observatory and Justiça Global firmly denounce the recent actions of the federal authorities and of the authorities of the State of Rio Grande do Sul aiming to assimilate human rights defenders struggling for the right to land to criminals and elements threatening national security, as a means to harass them in order to hinder their work and to sanction their human rights activities.

Accordingly, the Observatory and Justiça Global urge the authorities of the Brazilian federal State and of the State of Rio Grande do Sul authorities to put an end to any act of harassment against the MST, its members as well as against all human rights defenders in the country, and to conform with Article 1 of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted on December 9, 1998, which states that “everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels”, as well as Article 12.2, which states that “the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually or in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present Declaration”.

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