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Brazil: Judge releases 13 policemen allegedly involved in the Pau D'Arco massacre

On 8 August 2017, a substitute judge released 13 policemen who were temporarily detained due to their alleged participation in the massacre of ten land rights defenders associated with **Liga de Campones Pobres – LCP (Poor Peasants' League)** carried out in Pau D'Arco, Pará, Brazil.

The [Liga de Campones Pobres](#) is a movement of farmers, rural workers and human rights defenders who work to protect the land rights of their communities. A recurring problem throughout Brazil is the occupation of land by so-called grileiros, a term referring to people who have seized control of large tracts of land, often using dubious title documents. Within this context, many human rights defenders have been killed.

On 8 August 2017, a substitute judge revoked the 30-days temporary detention of 11 military police and two civil police officers who were allegedly involved in the massacre of 10 land rights defenders carried out in Pau D'Arco. According to the Prosecution Office, the executions were premeditated. The 11 military police and two civil police officers were arrested for 30 days on 10 July 2017 at the request of the Prosecution, in order to safeguard the investigations and avoid interference and threats to witnesses. According to the Prosecution, there is evidence that the policemen detained had been actively attempting to hinder the investigation by threatening other police officers who were present at, but did not partake in the massacre. These police officers were also monitoring people entering the headquarters of the Federal Police in Redenção, where the investigations are taking place. The decision to revoke the temporary detention came as a shock to the survivors of the massacre, the Prosecutors and other land rights defenders in the region, who were expecting that the detention would be extended for an additional 30 days.

Early in the morning of 24 May, 2017, a group of 25 landless workers decided to reoccupy the Santa Lúcia farm, located in the municipality of Pau D'Arco, in the south of Pará. A large number of other workers were supposed to have joined the group, but they failed to reach the site. The group of 25 who did arrive at the site camped temporarily in the woods, roughly 300 meters from the old Santa Lúcia farmhouse. Around 6:30am, that same morning, four police vehicles approached the site and the land rights defenders fled into a neighbouring forest. The police officers pursued them into the woods and located them. According to survivors, the police started to shoot towards the unarmed group, who were standing under a tent, taking shelter from the rain. Consequently, human rights defenders **Antônio Pereira Milhomem, Bruno Henrique Pereira Gomes, Hecules Santos de Oliveira, Jane Julia de Oliveira, Nelson Souza Milhomem, Ozeir Rodrigues da Silva, Regivaldo Pereira da Silva, Ronaldo Pereira de Souza, Weldson Pereira da Silva, and Weclebson Pereira Milhomem** were killed by the police.

Human rights defenders and organisations in Brazil fear that the failure of the authorities to protect witnesses and to ensure that the investigation is thorough and impartial not only endangers those connected to the the 24 May massacre in Pau D'Arco, but further jeopardizes the safety of other land rights defenders, especially in Pará. According to the **Comissão Pastoral da Terra - CPT (Land Pastoral Commission)**, the Frei Henri settlement in Pará, also known as *Fazendinha* (small farm), which hosts more than 200 families on the margins of the PA 273 highway, is one of the most at risk. Since 2010, the families have been struggling for the land to be included under the agrarian reform program. Despite repeated judicial victories, the authorities have constantly failed

to enforce court decisions and to ensure the safety of the families, who are regularly threatened and attacked by farmers in the region.

Violence against human rights defenders in Brazil has escalated in tandem with the country's ongoing political and economic crisis. This situation is of particular concern as one of the first acts of the new interim government was to dismantle the Ministry of Women, Racial Equality and Human Rights. In 2017, after pressure from different sectors, the government created the Ministry of Human Rights, with a restricted mandate. The government has also dismantled the Ministry for Rural Development and the Agrarian Ombudsman. In addition, high profile politicians in the country have made several negative statements against civil society movements and organisations, suggesting that their actions are of a criminal nature. The Minister of Justice has declared in previous statements that the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra* – MST (Landless Worker's Movement) used "[guerrilla tactics](#)" during its latest protests.

According to the CPT, in 2016 there were 1079 incidents related to land disputes in the country, a sharp increase compared to 771 cases in 2015. In Pará, between 1995 and 2010 there were 408 incidents with 61 people killed, representing around 35% of the cases nationwide. CPT also reported that in the micro-region encompassing Pau D'Arco and its surroundings, from 1990 to 2017, 72 land rights defenders were killed in 39 incidents.

The Brazilian Human Rights Defenders Committee [reported](#) 66 killings of human rights defenders in 2016. Thirty-two of these murders occurred in the north of the country, the same region where Pará is located. Most were related to land conflicts. So far this year, the Committee has reported 43 killings of human rights defenders.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the decision of judicial authorities to release the 13 policemen allegedly involved in the Pau D'Arco massacre, in light of the evidence available, since it believes that this could further endanger survivors and witnesses and jeopardize the investigation. Front Line Defenders urges authorities in Brazil to take all necessary actions to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity of the land rights defenders involved in the case, as well as their families.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Brazil to:

1. Take all necessary measures to guarantee the physical and psychological integrity and security of the survivors of the Pau D'Arco massacre, as well as their families and other land rights defenders in the country;
2. Ensure that the ongoing investigation into the killings of human rights defenders Antônio Pereira Milhomem, Bruno Henrique Pereira Gomes, Hecules Santos de Oliveira, Jane Julia de Oliveira, Nelson Souza Milhomem, Ozeir Rodrigues da Silva, Regivaldo Pereira da Silva, Ronaldo Pereira de Souza, Weldson Pereira da Silva, and Weclebson Pereira Milhomem is thorough and impartial, with a view to bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Take measures to ensure that government officials or other public figures refrain from making statements or declarations stigmatising the legitimate work of human rights defenders in the country;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Brazil are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.

