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Brazil: Killing of human rights defender and landless worker Fernando dos Santos Araújo

On 26 January 2021, land rights defender Fernando dos Santos Araújo was killed in his house inside the Santa Lúcia Farm, in Pau D'Arco. Fernando dos Santos Araújo was a landless worker in Amazonia region, and one of the survivors of the 2017 Pau D'Arco massacre, which made him a key witness in the criminal case.

[Fernando dos Santos Araújo](#) worked in defence of land in the state of Pará, one of the most dangerous regions for human rights defenders in Brazil. He was a survivor of, and witness to, the largest massacre of rural workers in Brazil since 1996, the Pau D'Arco massacre, which occurred on 24 May 2017 and resulted in 10 rural workers being killed by police troops in Santa Lúcia Farm. The defender managed to escape, but witnessed the killing of his partner during the massacre. He was one of the few eyewitnesses for the criminal case, which is against 16 civilian and military police officers. From the outset of the investigation, his accounts were essential to elucidating the facts and enabling the investigation to confirm details of the massacre.

On 26 January 2021, Fernando dos Santos Araújo was found dead in his house, killed by a gunshot to the back of the head. He had been included in the Victims and Witnesses Programme due to the risks he faced. In early 2017, he returned to the Santa Lúcia Farm in the hope of guaranteeing a piece of land together with dozens of families from [Jane Julia Camp](#),

Despite the constant threats and harassments he received, Fernando dos Santos Araújo continued to act as a spokesperson of the survivors, becoming a central figure in the search for justice for the victims of Pau D'Arco massacre.

The killing of the human rights defender occurred just one day after his lawyer José Vargas Sobrinho Junior was transferred to house arrest. Exactly 25 days before Fernando dos Santos Araújo's killing, his lawyer was placed in preventative detention as part of an ongoing investigation, which has been characterised by weak evidence and irregularities, as highlighted by the Brazilian Bar Association of the state of Pará. José Vargas Sobrinho Junior has a prominent role in the defence of landless workers in the south of Pará, and is particularly well recognised for his work in assisting the victims of the Pau D'Arco massacre. The lawyer and human rights defender has also faced increased threats in retaliation for his work in relation to this case, for which he has been included in the Program for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders since 2017.

Although investigations into the Pau D'Arco massacre have progressed, there are still many unanswered questions, and no charges have been brought against the intellectual actors of the crime. On April 2018, after the first hearings, the 16 police officers accused of carrying out the massacre were permitted to remain free, while awaiting the trial. Since then, they have returned to work in their duty stations and remain active, with gun licences.

Front Line Defenders condemns the killing of Fernando dos Santos Araújo, as it believes that he was targeted and killed solely because of his peaceful and legitimate work in defence of land rights. Front Line Defenders is also concerned about the fact that the human rights defender was killed in a context where his lawyer has been facing a questionable judicial process, raising serious concerns about the negative impacts both situations have on the pursuit of justice for the victims of the Pau D'Arco Massacre.

Front Line Defenders is also concerned about the lack of progress in the investigation into the killing of Fernando dos Santos Araújo. Front Line Defenders has received information about several inconsistencies surrounding the criminal expert report and investigative process; over one week after the murder, State Secretariat of Public Security and Social Defense of Pará (SEGUP-PA) has still not released an official statement on the line of investigation it has adopted. Local civil society organizations have not received responses from the authorities on what actions will be taken to ensure the safety of those still living in the area.

Front Line Defenders urges the authorities in Brazil to:

1. Strongly condemn the killing of the land rights defender and landless worker Fernando dos Santos Araújo and ensure that the State Secretariat of Public Security and Social Defense of Pará issues an official public statement condemning the killing;
1. Ensure that the investigation being carried out into the the killing of Fernando dos Santos Araújo is impartial, transparent and in line with international standards, and takes into account his role as a land rights defenders and critical eyewitness survivor of Pau D'Arco massacre;
2. Ensure the protection of the residents of Camp Jane Júlia and all remaining witnesses of Pau D'Arco massacre, as well as the lawyers and human rights defenders involved in the case;
3. To guarantee, in all circumstances, that all human rights defenders in Brazil, in particular those defending land rights, can carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free from any restrictions, including judicial harassment.