

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## **Brazil: Swiss multinational turns over contested land to state authorities**

The decision by Syngenta seeds, the Swiss multinational, to hand over its 127 hectare experimental farm to the Paraná state government on 14 October last, marks a welcome end to a violent conflict over the site.

The state government has since promised to use the land for the production of native seeds for distribution to small-hold farmers and impoverished countries in the region that have suffered devastation from hurricanes. Following many months of pressure from land activists, human rights groups and the state government, Syngenta's decision to relinquish the land stands as an important step in the defence of the human rights of those struggling for their rights to land and survival across the state.

The handover comes, on the first anniversary of the killings of Valmir Mota de Oliveira (known as Keno), a leader of the landless workers movement (MST), and Fabio Ferreira, one of Syngenta's security guards.

A year on NF Segurança, Syngenta's security company, still provides services for local landowners, even though its licence was revoked in September. While official investigations, including Keno's murder inquiry, found extensive evidence of irregular or criminal activity, the company continues to function pending an appeal.

It is vital that steps are taken by federal and state authorities across Brazil to control the proliferation of irregular or unlawful security companies, many of which are effectively acting as illegal militias in the service of landowners or agro-industry. The state and federal authorities must investigate individuals, organizations or companies which use security companies which commit human rights violations or criminal acts. Those found to have failed in their duty to adequately vet or oversee their security company must be held to account.

The trial of those accused of the murders of MST leader Keno and Fabio Ferreira will begin in November. Amnesty International calls on the Paraná state authorities to ensure that it meets international standards for fair trials in order that only those responsible are brought to justice. It is time to end impunity for rural killings and the protection of vested political and economic powers.

### **Background Information**

Early in the morning of 21 October 2007, members of the *Via Campesina* and the *Movimento de Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST), both landless workers' movements, occupied the 127-hectare farm near the town of Santa Teresa do Oeste. The land was used for field trials of genetically modified crops. The use of the land was contested both because it potentially contravened an environmental zoning law and because it was identified as a possible site for land reform for the settlement of landless agricultural workers.

Hours after the occupation, 40 armed men entered the farm and shot MST leader Keno dead in the chest at point blank range. One of the security guards, Fabio Ferreira, was also killed. At the time the police suggested he was accidentally shot by his colleagues, though prosecutors later charged a member of the MST with the killing, informing Amnesty International that these possibilities had to be tested in court. Eight others were injured in the attack, including MST member Izabel Nascimento, who was beaten unconscious and remains in a coma in hospital, in a critical condition.

Human rights groups and land activists in the state of Paraná have previously suffered threats and intimidation from members of landowners' associations or those acting in their name. In a public hearing on October 18 2007, local rights groups presented a dossier of evidence to the state human rights commission which highlighted the activities of armed men hired by landowners and agricultural companies. According to the report, they act with no legal controls or oversight, often using violent and illegal methods to forcibly evict, threaten and attack land activists.

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