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national farmers union

In Union Is Strength

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OCTOBER 26, 2007

NFU SUPPORTS CALL FOR PUBLIC INVESTIGATION INTO TRAGEDY

The National Farmers Union is urging the Canadian government to support a public investigation into the murder of a farm leader in Brazil.

Earlier this week, a tragic incident occurred in the southern Brazilian state of Parana when a 32-year old farm leader was shot and killed by private security forces hired by Syngenta, a Swiss-based multinational agro-chemical company. A report dated October 23, 2007, by Reuters News Agency confirmed the shooting. Seven security officers employed to guard a Syngenta-owned operation now face possible homicide charges.

In a letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Jan Slomp, Chair of the NFU International Program Committee (IPC), said the tragedy is shocking proof that the democratic rights of rural citizens are increasingly at risk.

While Brazil's national government allows use of genetically-modified (GM) seeds for a limited number of crops, the state of Parana has recently outlawed GM corn and has tried repeatedly to shut down the Syngenta farm, according to Reuters News Agency. Syngenta, which was fined in the past for planting GM seeds close to a protected nature preserve, relies on security guards to patrol its property and is involved in a legal fight with the Parana state government. Syngenta has claimed its guards are not armed.

The slain farm leader was a member of Brazil's Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST). The MST was protesting field-testing by Syngenta of GM soya and corn seeds on an operation adjacent to an "agro-ecology" farm run by MST members. The probability of contamination of their crops from the GM seeds would have made it illegal for the MST members to sell their product. In Brazil, farmers are legally prohibited from selling crops containing transgenic material.

The incident began October 21, when approximately 300 MST members occupied a portion of the Syngenta field-test plot. According to Reuters news agency, a local police spokesperson said Syngenta guards, "returned, armed, to retake the farm." The MST farm leader, Valmir Motta, was killed when he was shot twice in the chest. Six other farmers were wounded by security guards, and a security guard was also killed from unknown causes.

The MST has called on the judicial authorities in Brazil to launch a full and open public investigation into the murder of Mr. Motta and what role, if any, company employees may have had in arming the private militia employed to guard the Syngenta test plots. The Via Campesina, a coalition of organizations representing farm groups in 90 countries, are also urging an investigation into the matter.

“The NFU fully supports the call for an investigation into the brutal slaying of Mr. Motta,” stated Slomp in the letter to the Prime Minister. “The NFU is deeply concerned about this incident, not only because of the murder of a farm leader, but because of the larger implications for the democratic rights of rural citizens. The use of excessive force by armed gunmen employed by private companies in such an instance must be condemned by all democratic governments. We strongly recommend the Canadian government register its support for a full and fair investigation.”

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