

Brazil: angry protests hit state murder in London

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The July 22 police execution of Brazilian-born electrician Jean Charles de Menezes on a London subway car has provoked shock and angry protest in the 27-year-old immigrant's native land.

Some 1,500 working people and youth demonstrated Monday in Jean's hometown of Gonzaga, a rural center in the southeastern state of Minas Gerais with a population of less than 6,000, most of them impoverished small farmers.

The protest came after the opening of a police inquest in London revealed that the Brazilian immigrant had been shot eight times at point-blank range—seven bullets to the head and one to the shoulder—as he lay pinned down by undercover cops on the floor of the subway car. Earlier reports based on witness accounts were that he had been shot five times.

Police first claimed that the savage killing was part of an “anti-terrorist operation” following failed attempts to detonate explosives in London's transportation system a day earlier, an apparent bid to repeat the deadly transit bombings of July 7. The authorities were subsequently forced to acknowledge that Jean had no connection whatsoever to the attacks, and that they had killed an innocent man.

In the aftermath of the shooting, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other officials have issued formal apologies and promises of financial compensation for the murdered worker's family, while stressing that the British police's “shoot to kill” policy would continue. Blair's plea for sympathy for the “difficult circumstances” faced by the police is virtually an assurance that this will not be the last such cold-blooded state murder.

Calling the killing an “assassination,” Gonzaga's mayor, Julio de Souza, dismissed the British government's expressions of regret. “It's easy for Blair

to apologize, but it doesn't mean very much,” he said. “What happened to English justice and England, a place where police patrol unarmed?”

Demonstrators carried the Brazilian flag as well as hand-printed placards denouncing the British police as “the real terrorists” and demanding that Jean's body be returned immediately. Other signs read, “Jean's dream was ended by British brutality” and “The British shoot first and ask questions later.” The British authorities have delayed the return of the Brazilian worker's remains, claiming that they are a key piece of evidence in their inquiry into the shooting.

Family members said that London's withholding of the body has only deepened their grief. Jean's mother Maria Menezes said she does not know how many more days she will be forced to wait to bury her son. “I am totally furious with the police,” she said. “How can they kill workers? Nothing will cure this pain.”

“Apologies are not enough, we want justice,” the demonstrators chanted Tuesday as they marched slowly through the cobblestone streets of Gonzaga. They paused for a prayer for the murdered man and to sing the national anthem.

The killing of a young worker abroad stuck a powerful chord in the small town, where virtually every family has a relative who has emigrated to the US or Europe to seek work, sending money home to alleviate the local poverty.

Throughout the country, the brutal public execution in London has touched a raw nerve. Brazil has had its own bitter experience with police death squads, which acted against political dissidents under the dictatorship and continue to claim victims among the country's poor. Last year, according to Amnesty International, police shot to death 663 people in Brazil, a country of 180 million people.

Media reports suggesting that Jean had run from the police because he was working in Britain in violation of immigration law have been discounted by both the British and Brazilian governments. Relatives in Brazil pointed out that he came home earlier this year for vacation and then returned to Britain in April, which would have been impossible if he lacked a necessary visa.

The false accusations that he was an illegal immigrant were widely seen as an attempt to somehow justify the shooting. It appears entirely possible that the young worker commuting to his job had no idea he was being chased by the police. Witnesses have reported that his attackers never identified themselves before dragging him down and shooting him.

Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim met with his British counterpart Jack Straw and the two appeared together at a joint press conference Monday in an attempt to assuage the growing anger over the killing.

Straw declared that he “profoundly regretted” the killing and offered his condolences. Amorim had sought the British offer of compensation to the family. Neither indicated how much would be offered to the family, and Straw indicated that the amount would be determined based on the investigation of the shooting. Jean’s wages in London constituted a crucial support for his family in Brazil, allowing them to build a house recently.

Amorim stressed that the “terrorism must be fought with a total respect for human rights.” Asked if he was satisfied with the British government’s response to the killing, he replied, “I think I will only be able to answer that fully when all of the stages mentioned have been completed, when the investigation has been concluded and those found guilty have been punished ... when the questions related to the family have been settled.” He added, “It is clear that if things happen in the way they apparently happened in this instance, it can only benefit terrorism.”

Both Jean’s relatives and the Brazilian people as a whole were far more critical of the Blair government’s response. Neither hypocritical apologies nor promises of cash compensation have been enough to dispel their anger.

“His apologies aren’t easing our pain,” said Arialva Pereira, one of Jean’s cousins, in response to Blair’s statement. “He’s not saying anything about punishing

the police who did this, it’s more like he’s supporting them.”

Another cousin living in London indicated to the BBC that the family would pursue a legal case against the police and the Blair government. “They have to pay for that in many ways, because if they do not, they are going to kill many people, they are going to kill thousands of people,” said Alex Pereira. “They killed my cousin, they could kill anyone.”

Unions and Brazil’s landless peasant movement called demonstrations outside the British embassy in Brasilia and the consulate in Rio de Janeiro on Tuesday and Wednesday. The Landless Rural Workers’ Movement (MST) issued a statement charging that Jean “was assassinated in cold blood, a victim of intolerance,” and calling for Britain’s withdrawal from Iraq.

Newspaper letter columns provided a reflection of the outrage sweeping the country and the popular association of the killing with the US and British war in Iraq.

Ademário Iris da Silva of Niterói wrote to the Rio daily *O Globo* that the blame for the killing of the Brazilian worker fell not only on the London police, but also “on Bush and, principally, on Tony Blair. Before launching a war, the leaders of the globalized world should face the fact that everything is globalized, including the terror that they impose on other peoples.”

A reader from Curitiba wrote the paper, “The murder of a Brazilian in London only proves that brutality and stupidity is on the rise the world over. If in London a person is assassinated on his back, one can imagine what the British soldiers are doing in Iraq. Or what they did in the epoch of colonialism. Who are the barbarians? Who really is a terrorist?”

And from Rio, a reader commented, “The murder of the Brazilian in London is a consequence of the policy of war. In militarizing the world, the US and its British allies have turned it into an unsafe place for everyone. But this doesn’t matter to Bush and Blair, who want not peace but power.”



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