

Britain: De Menezes family demands justice in police murder

Paul Bond

12 October 2005

Nearly 200 people packed a lecture theatre at the London School of Economics (LSE) for the official launch of the Jean Charles de Menezes Family Campaign on October 10. De Menezes, a young Brazilian worker, was shot dead by police at Stockwell underground station on July 22, the victim of a shoot-to-kill policy instigated in secret by the police and sanctioned by the British government.

The Family Campaign is calling for an investigation into the circumstances of Jean Charles's death, both to ensure justice and to prevent similar deaths in future. The meeting heard the harrowing words of Maria Ambrosia da Silva, de Menezes' mother, speaking publicly for the first time since the killing of her son, when she said that justice "must and will be done." "I do not want," she said, "any other mother to suffer as I have done."

In the immediate aftermath of the murder of Jean Charles de Menezes, there was a systematic campaign of disinformation aimed at justifying the policy of summary execution. Although the police denied feeding false information to compliant sections of the media, many of the stories that circulated could only have come from official sources.

It was claimed that de Menezes had been identified leaving the house of a suspected terrorist, wearing an unseasonably heavy overcoat. On his arrival at Stockwell Underground rail station, he supposedly vaulted the ticket barrier and attempted to flee police. Police identified themselves and shot him because of fears that he was carrying a bomb. Some witnesses claimed to have seen wires sticking out of his clothes.

All of these stories were proved to be lies.

In fact, de Menezes had left his communal block of flats wearing a denim jacket. He took a 20-minute bus ride to the station, where he picked up a free paper and entered by using his season ticket. He went slowly down the escalator. At no point did he run from police, because the

officers were in plain clothes and never identified themselves. He was not even aware that he was being followed. When he reached the platform he entered the train and sat down. At this point he was shot seven times in the head, and once in the shoulder, at point-blank range with no prior warning. Three other shots missed.

On the basis of false stories, press reports stated definitively that de Menezes was a suicide bomber implicated in the bomb attempts of July 21. The police only informed the family of his death some 30 hours later. His cousins, who lived with Jean Charles, were corralled in a hotel room by police and interrogated. The telephone was not working, so they were unable to ring their family in Brazil.

As it became clear that de Menezes was an innocent man, the police worked overtime to limit the political fallout from their murderous actions.

Sir Ian Blair, commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, stalled an investigation by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) for five days. Instead, he promised an internal investigation by the Metropolitan Police. The IPCC has a statutory duty to investigate. The Metropolitan Police also announced that CCTV footage from Stockwell station was missing.

A deputation, led by Deputy Assistance Commissioner John Yates, went to Brazil to visit de Menezes' family and offer them a £15,000 "ex gratia" payment. The police insisted that the meeting had to take place without the family lawyer being present. When the family said they would be happy to discuss with the police, but were waiting for the arrival of their lawyer, the deputation left.

The Family Campaign is demanding to know the full facts of what happened on July 22. Its central demands are for a swift conclusion to the IPCC investigation, with the publication of its findings, and for appropriate criminal charges being brought against those responsible. The family is also calling for a full judicial public inquiry to

investigate the police operation that culminated in the murder of de Menezes, police actions following his death, and the shoot-to-kill policy itself.

Gareth Peirce, the family's lawyer, told the meeting that de Menezes' family had been asking from the outset all the relevant questions that the police still needed to answer. How could Jean Charles have been identified as a suspect? If he was a suspect, how could he have been allowed to take a bus and enter the station? How could his execution have been lawful?

She pointed to the new waves of anti-terrorist legislation being promulgated by the government, and said that the country already has more than it needs. She asked whether the police use the existing legislation properly, and whether new legislation was being proposed for propaganda purposes? At the same time, she said, there is an extra-parliamentary culture of police policy, as witnessed in the shoot-to-kill policy.

Peirce noted that Sir John Stevens, former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, had boasted in his newspaper column of introducing the policy when he had previously been employed investigating shoot-to-kill operations in Northern Ireland. She also drew attention to the forthcoming debate in the House of Lords on the use of evidence extracted by torture, and the deliberate policy of returning people to countries that employ torture.

The most far-reaching historical overview came from Amnesty International's Livio Zilli, who noted that Britain has a long history of allegations of unlawful killings that have never been resolved. Amnesty is demanding a mechanism for independent investigations: it expressed particular concern over police attempts to block the IPCC's investigation. The fact that the IPCC had not opposed the actions of the police towards the IPCC raised concerns that it was susceptible to pressure from the Metropolitan Police, and possibly the Home Office.

Matthew Taylor MP, former chair of the Liberal Democrats, was most concerned that repressive legislation had been introduced without Parliament providing it with a fig leaf of legitimacy. He justified shoot-to-kill operations, stating, "Of course, we all understand" that under certain circumstances "it may be ... reasonable to use lethal force."

He regretted, however, the lack of parliamentary debate on the shoot-to-kill policy. Had it been debated in Parliament, he said, he would have opposed it. If it had then gone through Parliament, though, it would have had "some kind of legitimacy," however unpalatable.

Several speakers drew attention to other victims of

police killings and repression. Susan Alexander, the mother of Azelle Rodney, compared her son's case to that of Jean Charles de Menezes. Rodney, an innocent man, was also smeared in the press after he was shot in the head by police in April this year. The postmortem was rushed and the family was not notified. Ms. Alexander expressed her lack of confidence in the IPCC, noting that the officer involved in the death of her son had still not been interviewed.

The human rights campaigner Bianca Jagger drew attention to Prime Minister Tony Blair's demands for more draconian legislation on the grounds that the rules of engagement with terrorists have changed. Jagger noted that this marked a reintroduction of the death penalty by the back door, as the British government had rejected political debate.

In the debate that followed, a speaker from the floor argued that all the police commissioners involved should be prosecuted for conspiracy to murder, along with Home Secretary Charles Clarke. A friend of the de Menezes family said that it was "impossible" for them to have any dealings with the police because of the lies and obstruction. One speaker, who had been in Tavistock Square on July 7 when a bomb exploded on a bus, said that not all victims of terrorism supported the shoot-to-kill policy or were uncritical of it.

A question was asked about the intervention of two Brazilian government representatives.

It was pointed out that the representatives had made no effort to contact the de Menezes family. They were, said one speaker, pursuing their own political agenda. There has been much discussion of the British government having adopted a shoot-to-kill policy already practiced in Brazil. It was noted by a local politician from Sao Paulo that some 500 to 800 people are shot dead each year in that city alone.



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