

# Syngenta: murder and private militias in Brazil

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Last October 21<sup>st</sup>, an armed militia under contract to the GM seeds multinational Syngenta invaded the Terra Livre camp in Paraná in Brazil, killing with two shots from point blank range a 34 year-old activist of the Landless Workers Movement (MST), Valmir Mota de Oliveira, known as Keno, a father of three. The attackers seriously wounded other people of the same movement.

As the MST put it, “Keno was one among hundreds of Via Campesina militants who over a year ago made public to Brazil and the world the environmental crimes of Syngenta”, something the multinational could not let pass.

In March 2006 at the same time the United Nations Biological Diversity Agreement meeting was held in Paraná with its International Protocol on Biosecurity, that sets rules for cross-border movements of GM seeds, Via Campesina’s branch in Brazil occupied Syngenta’s GM trial fields in Santa Teresa do Oeste, trials which were illegal for being sited in the buffer zone of the Iguazú National Park that holds the famous waterfalls of the same name.

According to Brazil’s biosecurity law, it was forbidden to sow GM seeds within 10km of a protected natural area. Thanks to the prominence of the occupation and to accusations from social organizations, the environmental authority, IBAMA, ordered Syngenta to pay a US\$500,000 fine, something the multinational never complied with. Later Lula da Silva’s government changed the law, reducing the buffer area to just 500 metres. Syngenta took advantage of the favour Lula did them and appealed the fine. A final judgement has yet to be made.

For the MST and Via Campesina, the trial field occupation is to denounce the impunity agri-business multinationals enjoy, invading unique natural sites like the Iguazú Park with GM seeds and intensive use of agro-poisons. But, too, Syngenta’s trial field is next door to an MST settlement which had been there long beforehand, thus rendering its native varieties of maize at great risk of GM contamination.

The Via Campesina proposal, from the outset of the occupation, was to transform Syngenta’s contaminant field into a research and production centre for agro-ecological seeds, accessible to all and completely without patents.

To that end, in November 2006, Roberto Requiao, state governor of Paraná made a decree confiscating Syngenta’s field area so as to set up the Parana Agro-Ecological Reference Centre. Syngenta went to the state courts - dominated by big landowners - and won a provisional suspension of the decree and the right to have the area returned.

In July 2007, faced with a court eviction order along with threats and violence from hired killers and security guards contracted to Syngenta, the 70 occupying families decided to leave the area, moving to the neighbouring Olga Benário settlement to wait for a definitive court judgement.

In October - clearly unarmed - they returned to occupy the field area to resume their activities in

favour of native seeds and agro-ecology as a way of pressing for a legal resolution of the conflict. It was at that moment they were savagely attacked with guns fired straight at people by the NF security company contracted to Syngenta.

The multinational admits that it contracted NF, but denies responsibility for the use of guns, which is illegal. However, the Terra de Direitos organization has pointed out they had formally complained to the Federal Police and to Syngenta since September that the NF security company was using guns. The police even arrested a woman owner of the company for holding illegal arms. Syngenta, aware of this, carried on with the contract and, with full knowledge of the situation, ordered the murderous attack.

Terra de Direitos has also formally complained that two MST activists, Celso Barbosa and Celia Lourenco, are receiving death threats, were chased by the same gunmen and that the situation of threats and violence in the region is serious thanks to violent escalation on the part of armed guards under contract to Syngenta and regional landowners. Already the previous December, in an attack organized by big rural landowners against MST activists near Cascavel in Paraná, the victims recognized people who worked for Syngenta. On July 20<sup>th</sup> the heavily armed force contracted to Syngenta invaded the Olga Benário settlement, directly threatening various people and in the end firing their weapons at an MST banner, all of which has been documented in a complaint to the police.

The MST, Via Campesina and Terra de Direitos along with dozens of Brazilian social, environmental and human rights organizations have condemned the events and demand that Syngenta be charged with responsibility for the murder, that the GM multinational pay for its social and environmental offences, hand over the trial fields and leave the country. Just demands deserving everyone's support, like the deep recognition and solidarity of movements in Brazil, to show to the world the environmental and human crimes committed by those promoting GM seeds who seek to monopolize seeds, earth and water.

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