

BRAZIL

At the request of a local prosecutor and an organization of victims' families, EAAF members made two separate missions to the Araguaia and Paraná provinces of Brazil, to investigate cases of political militants disappeared in the late sixties and early seventies.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

On March 31, 1964, members of the Brazilian military, upset at the agrarian, labor, and military reform programs of President João Goulart, staged a coup and inaugurated a military dictatorship in Brazil. According to a report entitled *Brazil: Nunca Mais*, published in 1985 by the Catholic Church in Brazil, the coup received support from the United States, directly through offers of arms and indirectly through U.S. funding for anti-government propaganda.¹ Initially, the military consolidated power in Brazil's executive branch and placed restrictions on political activity in the country. Shortly thereafter, Marshal Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco, then Chief of Staff of the army, was appointed President. Although Castelo Branco's administration allowed limited political opposition, hard-line military leaders urged broader repression and more extensive executive control. Castelo Branco's presidency (1964 to 1967) brought ever-more extensive restrictions on political action, the expansion of military jurisdiction in civilian affairs, and the eventual consolidation of virtually all legislative power in the executive branch. When Castelo Branco's successor, General Artur da Costa e Silva, became president in 1967, a new constitution "gave total license





Nova Aurora. August 2001. Excavation in progress. Photo by EAAF.



Nova Aurora. August 2001. Excavating initial trenches. Photo by EAAF.

to the president of the republic and several high government officials.”² The final constitutional form of dictatorship appeared in 1968, when Costa e Silva issued the Fifth Institutional Act, fully authorizing executive control of the government and wholly restricting legislative input.

Military rule in Brazil focused in large part on economic reforms designed to promote economic growth and restore the confidence of foreign investors. Earlier nationalization projects sponsored by Goulart gave way to policies which “open[ed] up all doors to foreign capital through measures such as easy credit and fiscal incentives for the establishment of multi-national corporations in Brazil and the removal of obstacles to the repatriation of profits.”³ These policies led to a high rate of economic growth in Brazil between 1969-1973, but they also exacerbated social tensions by enlarging the gap between rich and poor citizens, as the latter’s conditions of living deteriorated. Popular dissent against the government’s economic policies led to heightened military repression, and eventually to guerrilla attacks on the government and a wave of state-sponsored human rights abuses.

During the period of military rule, small guerrilla groups emerged to oppose the government, frequently groups associated with one or more factions formed from the Brazilian Communist party, which split in 1962 over differences in revolutionary strategy. One faction supported a peaceful transition to power, while the other advocated an armed struggle based in rural areas. The latter faction adopted the name Communist Party of Brazil, known by its initials in Portuguese as the PC do B. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, a number of splinter groups and guerrillas associated with the PC do B waged campaigns against the dictatorship, targeting, among others, *fazendas* (large rural estates), government officials, and occasionally foreign diplomats.

In response, the government of General Emilio Garrastazú Médici, the successor to Costa e Silva, undertook a massive campaign of military repression, in the process committing a multitude of human rights abuses. The most complete account of such abuses in Brazil was the 1985 report *Brazil: Nunca Mais*, translated into

English as *Torture in Brazil*. BNM, as it is known, is the most complete account of human rights abuses in Brazil. It consists of a collection of testimonies that were kept in military archives, and secretly photocopied there by lawyers working with the Catholic Church. The testimonies, collected at great risk, confirmed that

“reports made during the Médici period by human rights organizations on tortures, killings of political opponents, disappearances, raids on private homes, the complete lack of respect for the rights of citizens, and failure to observe the legislation enacted by the regime

Military rule in Brazil focused in large part on economic reforms designed to promote economic growth and restore the confidence of foreign investors. These policies led to a high rate of economic growth in Brazil between 1969-1973.

itself. The BNM study revealed that the highest level of tortures and deaths occurred during this period.”⁴

It was during this period that the majority of cases of disappearance of political opponents also occurred, the result of kidnappings and assassinations of guerrilla members and others who fought against the military regime.

ARAGUAIA

Between July 13 and 20, 2001 Luis Fondebrider and Darío Olmo conducted excavations in the Araguaia region in the north of Brazil, at sites located in the states of Pará and Tocantins. EAAF had previously worked in Araguaia in 1996.⁵ The 2001 mission was requested by the Prosecutor’s Office of Brasilia, at the suggestion of relatives of the disappeared. The mission’s objective was to establish the fate of disappeared members of an affiliate of the PC do B, the Guerrilla de Araguaia, an armed group which operated in

this region in the late sixties and early seventies, and was later annihilated by the Brazilian Army. Of the 63 members of the Guerrilla de Araguaia, only four survived; it is thought that 17 to 19 civilians accused of collaborating with the Guerrilla also disappeared. Many of the bodies of the guerrilla members were never returned to their families, and their whereabouts are unknown, although it is suspected that they are buried in common and individual graves scattered throughout the region.

Excavations were conducted at four sites identified by witnesses as areas where mass graves may have been dug. One site—known as Site C and located at Fazenda Caribe, a ranch near Chega con Jeito—was identified by Crimeia de Almeida, a survivor from the Guerrilla de Araguaia and former companion of Adre Grabois, one of the guerrillas presumed killed by the military. She is now a member of the Association of Relatives of Disappeared People, an organization of victims' relatives which is the principal force behind the investigations in Araguaia. Almeida identified the site as the former residence of guerrillas, and remembered a well in which they used to throw trash. She suspected that the well may have later served as a mass grave for the guerrillas. Excavations conducted by EAAF revealed no evidence of human remains in the well.

The three remaining sites—Site A, Fazenda Tabocao Tossivel, a ranch about 10 km from Brejo Grande do Araguaia; Site B, Fazenda São Sebastião, a ranch outside of Xambioa; and Site D, in Cro, a town south of São Domingos—were identified by witnesses who remembered seeing suspicious activity in the areas, or remembered seeing military personnel in the areas and therefore suspected graves might be located there. In every case the environment had changed substantially since the presumed time of the killings. At each of the three sites, EAAF conducted an archaeological investigation in an area larger than that indicated by witnesses, and excavated each area to levels undisturbed by prior digging. No human remains were found at any of the sights.

PARANÁ

Between August 1 and 7, EAAF members Darío Olmo and Miguel Nieva undertook excavations in a field near Nova Aurora, in Paraná State in the south of Brazil, to investigate the disappearances of five members of the Vanguarda Popular Revolucionaria (VPR). The VPR was a Brazilian guerrilla group formed in 1968 by former members from both the *Organização Marxista–Política Operaria* (Polop) and the *Movimento Nacionalista Revolucionario*. According to recent estimates, 37 people were killed during their militancy in the VPR. EAAF's investigation here was also undertaken at the request of the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared in Brazil, and at the urging of the Congressperson Nilmaria Miranda, a former member of the VPR.

In July 1974 a band of VPR militants known as the Onofre Pinto Group traveled to Paraná, reportedly tricked into believing they were going to participate in a guerrilla action. Five members of the Onofre Pinto group—the leader, Onofre Pinto, the Brazilians Daniel Jose de Carvalho, Joel Jose de Carvalho, Jose Lavechia, and an Argentinian named Victor Carlos Ruggia, disappeared on this trip. Reports indicated that the disappeared may have been buried on the outskirts of Nova Aurora, near an old airfield.

Olmo and Nieva identified an area of 30 square meters to excavate near the airfield, and crosscut this area with several trenches. Accompanying EAAF were members of the Ruggia family, as well as members of the Association of Relatives of Disappeared Persons in Brazil and Congressperson Miranda. There was no evidence of gravesites or human remains. Because of this, EAAF recommended a more exhaustive preliminary investigation of the case before the resumption of excavation.

FOOTNOTES

1. See the translation ed. Joan Dassin, *Torture in Brazil* (New York, 1986), p. 47 and pp.39-74 generally.
2. *Torture in Brazil*, p.51.
3. *Torture in Brazil*, p. 49.
4. *Torture in Brazil*, p. 53.
5. For further information see EAAF's 1996-97 Biannual Report.



Nova Aurora. August 2001. Excavating initial trenches. Photo by EAAF.