

Amazon Unionists Report Death Threats Are Collect

By JAMES BROOKE

Special to The New York Times

RIO DE JANEIRO, July 31 — Os-marino Amâncio Rodrigues, secretary of the National Council of Rubber Tappers, said here today that he and his associates were getting phoned death threats collect.

"We accept the charges because we think it is a union member in trouble," said Mr. Rodrigues, the political heir to the Amazon unionist Francisco (Chico) Mendes. Mr. Mendes was killed in 1988 after publicizing the cause of rubber tappers and nut collectors who were being forced out of their homes and jobs as ranchers extended their holdings into the rain forest.

Mr. Rodrigues met with the press today to denounce the death threats and in the process advance the cause of the Amazon dwellers.

When Mr. Mendes was shot to death after he made a similar announcement, the Brazilian Government set aside 6.5 million acres of rain forest for rubber tapping and other extractive activities. Promoting the rubber tappers' cause, Mr. Rodrigues visited the United States and Europe this year, receiving 12,000 letters of support.

No Softening of Attitudes

But in Acre, the Amazonian state 2,700 miles west of here where Mr. Mendes was killed, it appears that some hard-line attitudes have not softened since the murder.

"They call up the union hall and ask things like: 'Is Chico Mendes O.K.?' Would you like to be 'O.K.' like Chico?" recalled Mr. Rodrigues, who is running for a seat in the state assembly on the left-wing Workers Party ticket.

With at least six death threats against him this year, Mr. Rodrigues now travels in the Amazon with an escort of four armed rubber tappers.

Worrying about "another Chico Mendes case in Brazil," Romeu Tuma, director general of the federal police, announced two weeks ago that policemen would protect the unionist until the Oct. 3 elections.

Brothers Are Jailed

Meanwhile, many rubber tappers say that the best security would be a crackdown on the wave of murders in much of the western Amazon.

In a first step in June, in the first jury trial in 22 years in Xapuri, Mr. Mendes's hometown in Acre, Darci and Oloci Alves da Silva were sentenced to jail for shooting into a crowd of rubber tappers in 1988. The two brothers, both ranchers, are suspects in the Mendes murder.

Determined to bring the Mendes murder case to trial, rubber tappers and environmentalists banged pots in a protest outside the Acre state courthouse in June. It now appears that a trial may be held in late August.

In another sequel to the murder, filming is to start in August for a Hollywood movie depicting the life of Mr. Mendes. After an 18-month wrangle among studios, directors, rubber tappers and Mr. Mendes's heirs, David Puttnam won the rights to produce the film.

Mendes Heirs Squabble

At least three major books have already come out this year on the Mendes murder.

With several millions of dollars at stake, the movie has provoked fighting among the tappers and among Mr. Mendes's heirs, many of whom make less than \$100 a month.

Two weeks ago, a Rio de Janeiro law-

yer arranged press interviews here for Angela Mendes, the daughter of Mr. Mendes by a first marriage. The lawyer, Zélia de Oliveira, said she would seek to break all movie and book contracts because Miss Mendes had signed away her rights when she was a minor.

Defenders of Ilzamar Gadelha Mendes, Mr. Mendes's widow, say that there is no legal record of a first marriage by Mr. Mendes. Using some of her advance money from the movie, Mrs. Mendes has opened a restaurant in Xapuri called A Floresta, or The Forest.

But in June, during the trial of the Alves brothers, a man telephoned her and asked her if "everything was O.K.?" When she answered affirmatively, he persisted, asking, "But is everything really O.K.?"