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Confession Rocks Brazil Ecology Trial

Rancher's Son Says He Alone Killed Chico Mendes; Account Attacked

By Eugene Robinson
 Washington Post Foreign Service

XAPURI, Brazil, Dec. 12—The 22-year-old son of a local rancher stunned prosecutors, spectators and a newly picked jury today by suddenly confessing to the murder of ecologist and union leader Chico Mendes, but he maintained that his father, also accused, knew nothing about it.

The unexpected turn came barely an hour after the trial began. Darcy Alves spoke haltingly as Judge Adair Jose Longuini led him through a detailed description of the crime, which became a rallying point for ecologists around the world and brought a new focus to the battle over the fate of the Amazon basin.

Alves described entering

Mendes' back yard through an open gate on the night of Dec. 22, 1988, and seeing the ecologist and union leader inside. When Mendes emerged, Alves fired at him once with a shotgun, he said, and then threw the gun into the Acre River and walked away.

He said his father, 56-year-old Darly Alves da Silva—whom prosecutors have accused of directing the killing—was unaware of his hasty decision to eliminate Mendes, with whom the family was involved in a bitter land dispute.

Prosecutors said Darcy Alves' description of the slaying was at odds with the physical evidence they have gathered, and charged that the sudden confession was a son's attempt to save his father.

"It is evident that the crime did not happen in the manner he says,"

said Marcio Tomas Bastos, a member of the prosecution team. "The object is clearly to save Darcy."

Defense lawyers said even they were taken by surprise. Joao Lucena Leal, chief attorney for the defense, said that Darcy Alves told him only this morning that he intended to confess. Lucena Leal said he had entertained suspicions, but had finally decided that Darcy Alves was innocent—until today.

"I asked myself many times whether I was a defense lawyer or a detective," Lucena Leal said, describing to reporters how the young man had given him different versions of the truth, and adding, "Darcy is crazy."

Darcy Alves was out of the courtroom when his son confessed. The father then took his turn before the

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Frontier rancher Darly Alves and his son Darcy sit in court of Xapuri, Brazil, accused of killing ecologist Chico Mendes.

Confession Rocks Brazil's Rain Forest Trial

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judge, and denied being involved with the killing or knowing anything about it except what he read in the newspapers.

The version told in court is similar to the one told by Darly and Darcy Alves when they were in jail shortly after the killing. Darly Alves maintained then that he was uninvolved. Darcy Alves then admitted the killing, and gave authorities a detailed description of how he did it.

But Darcy Alves later recanted the jailhouse version, professing that he was innocent, and the defense team alleged that the confession was coerced.

Defense lawyers said today's turnaround established Darcy Alves' guilt, and noted that the judge is obliged by law to be lenient in sentencing him because he was under 21 when he committed the crime. They maintained that most of the case that the prosecution had planned to present is now irrelevant.

But prosecutors said they believe Darly Alves had his son kill Mendes because he had blocked their attempts to clear a big patch of rain forest outside Xapuri. Ecologists and union leaders have seen the slaying as an example of the brutal way in which ranchers have sought to eliminate opponents like Mendes—not only an ecologist, but also a labor organizer who championed the cause of landless rural workers.

Darcy Alves said he used a 16-gauge shotgun to kill Mendes and then threw the gun into the river, but prosecutors say that the crime was committed with a 20-gauge shotgun and that they have the weapon. Both the elder and the younger Alves said today that they had never seen the gun prosecutors displayed in court.

Prosecutors say that when Darcy Alves pulled the trigger, he was in the company of a ranch hand who worked with his father—which would be an important indication of a conspiracy in which Darly Alves might have been involved. Authorities say he is still at large.

Darcy Alves said several times today that he was alone when he killed Chico Mendes. "It was my own decision," he told the judge. "My father never knew of this."

A jury of five men and two women had just been chosen and the courtroom had just settled down for what looked like a dull morning of preliminaries when the torpor was suddenly dispersed by one unexpected word. "Do you confirm or deny the charges?" the judge asked Darcy Alves.

"Confirm," the young defendant said.

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Sandino Mendes, 5-year-old son of slain Brazilian environmentalist and labor organizer Chico Mendes.

Remote Brazil Town Girds For Big-Time Murder Trial In Xapuri, Preparations for the Chico Mendes Case

By Eugene Robinson
Washington Post Foreign Service

XAPURI, Brazil, Dec. 12—The victim was an international hero of the environmental movement. The accused mastermind of his murder is purportedly a sexual superman. And so as the heralded trial approached, this tiny town (pop. 6,000) at a bend of the muddy Acre river worked itself into a frenzy of anticipation. It was ready for prime time.

A house had been spruced up for Brazilian President Fernando Collor de Mello, who was sure to come. As for journalists, those camera-toting, lippen-brandishing oddities, they would surely descend in the thousands; accommodations were arranged

trial of the accused shotgun slayers of Chico Mendes, the ecologist and labor organizer who brought worldwide attention to the destruction of the Amazon rain forests.

The expectations proved to be a bit inflated. No prizes made the trip, and a trio of Brasília-based diplomats—from Britain, the United States, and Sweden—seem to be the nearest source of aid to international observers. The Brazilian president devised he would be represented by the camera-loving chief of the federal police, who isn't even staying overnight in Xapuri, but instead lies each evening to more comfortable lodgings in the state capital of Rio Branco, more than 100 miles away. As for reporters, a couple of hundred have already



Judge Adair Longval, left, speaks with two federal police agents in the room prepared for the Mendes murder trial.

The Scene in Xapuri

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but until the trial started today, with a bombshell confession to lives things up, they spent a distressing amount of time interviewing each other. [See related story on Page A33.]

But it still adds up to the biggest thing to happen to Xapuri since the rubber boom of the Second World War, when soaring demand turned the rubber trees scattered through the dense surrounding forest into shining pylons of gold.

Xapuri made itself ready. Curbs were given a fresh coat of white-wash. Workers laboriously chopped the woods from between the cobblestones of the streets. And Ronaldo Pereira loaded up his pickup truck and drove 50 miles from the town of Brasília to make pizza for the invading hordes.

Pereira and his family were putting up their pizza stall yesterday, just across the street from the courthouse where Mendes' accused killers Darly Alves da Silva and his son Darly are being tried. It had already become dismayingly apparent that the time had come to lower one's expectations.

"Aaah, I guess we're taking a gamble," Pereira said. "We'll see how it works out."

Everybody in town looked for an angle, and most people found one. Mendes' widow, Ilamar, has the only Xerox machine in town and is charging 70 cents a page. Restaurants will stay open as late as you like, although all serve the same meal of rice, beans and meat. Residents eagerly turned their homes into rooming houses.

Others made the journey to Xapuri to march their causes across the world's stage. A politician named Zamir Teixeira hit on the idea that each representative of the press should plant a rubber tree or a Brazil nut tree (the journalist's choice) at selected planting sites near town; his exhibit near the courthouse is called, in English, the "Show-Room of Trees for the World Press Tree Nursery." Teixeira has a way with names: The project is named in honor of his sons, Kennedy and Onassis.

There is a display of paintings in honor of Mendes and his causes—the destruction of the Amazon forests and the plight of rural workers, especially rubber tappers. One shows Mendes as a rubber tree, bleeding from V-shaped cuts in his abdomen like the cuts a tapper makes in a rubber tree. Almost incidentally, he is releasing a dove of peace with his right hand.

Everyone has a story about get-

ting here from the staging point of Rio Branco, the nearest city of any size. Almost all involve cars that got stuck in the mud of the so-called road that approaches Xapuri.

Xapuri is a 50-square-block grid of pastel-colored wooden houses on low stilts, a place where the stores along the one commercial strip sell a bizarre mix of the essential and the absurd, camp stoves and broom handles vying for space with plastic floral arrangements.

It's a place that brings home the McLuhanesque reality that however remote a place may be, it is still tuned in to the global wavelength. Teenage girls walk around in Tom Cruise T-shirts. During a visit to Mendes' grave site, the soundtrack was provided by a boom box across the way playing "You Make Me Feel Like a Natural Woman."

It's a surrealistic place, one out of Garcia-Marquez. A big, bright, shiny red firetruck was brought in for the trial, to perform some function yet unspecified. Xapuri had never seen such a firetruck. The crew has been driving the thing through the streets day and night, lights flashing but without siren, cruising up and down the potholed lanes to stop for a while here, a while there, and then to move on. It is like a character in an existential film. One turns the corner and there is the firetruck, coming from nowhere, heading wherever.

Darly Alves da Silva, the 56-year-old teacher accused of being the



Slain ecologist and labor organizer Chico Mendes.

mastermind behind Mendes' killing, is a wiry, wizened little man with thinning hair and bad teeth. But he is said to be irresistible to women. On his ranch near here he lived not only with his legal wife, but with three other women who were his lovers. He has fathered some 30 children, by most estimates, and claims never to have gone without sex for more than 10 hours—until he had the misfortune to be arrested.

Respected Brazilian newspapers have carried accounts of Darly's sex life, quoting his common-law wives ("In bed, he is like a dokey," said the newest wife, Margarete) and Darly's own denial that he relies on a specially concocted aphrodisiac for his prowess. There is hype and wind-

ness in Xapuri this week, but there is also passion and commitment. Joazeir Raimundo de Souza is one of the rubber tappers whose vanishing lifestyle Mendes fought to preserve. De Souza, like dozens of other tappers, decided that if a trial were to be held, he had to be here. So he walked 15 hours from his camp in the middle of the rain forest and waited until a truck came past that would take him to Xapuri.

De Souza doesn't know his neighbors in the bush—"I don't mix with anybody"—and doesn't care much about politics. But he knows whom he trusts and whom he doesn't.

"Whatever forest we have left to work in," he said, "we owe to the sacrifice of Chico Mendes."