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## Povos Indigenas no Brasil

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### Brazilian Stuns Courtroom: 'I Killed Chico Mendes'

DEC 13 1990

**XAPURI, Brazil, Dec. 12** — A Brazilian rancher's son stunned a court today by confessing that he shot and killed an Amazon environmental campaigner and union leader nearly two years ago. The confession in the death of Francisco (Chico) Mendes, on the opening day of the trial in this remote Amazon village in the western Brazilian state of Acre, took even his lawyers by surprise. The Mendes case caused an international furor and did much to focus world attention on the destruction of

the vast Amazon rain forest. The defendant, 22-year-old Darci Alves da Silva, along with his father, Darly Alves da Silva, 53, had pleaded not guilty to killing Mr. Mendes. But when he took the witness stand today the young man declared, "I killed Chico Mendes." "For us it was a surprise," one of the defense lawyers, João Lucena Leal, said of the confession by the son, whose sentencing is expected on Thursday. But the lawyers will continue to defend the elder Mr. da Silva, who continues to maintain his innocence.

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Mr. Mendes, 44 years old when he died, was a rubber tapper, one of about 2,000 people who make a living collecting latex, nuts, resins and other natural products of the Amazon forest. He organized other rubber tappers in a campaign to save the forests from the encroachment of cattlemen and farmers, whose slash-and-burn conversion of jungle into pasture and cropland has destroyed vast tracts of the Amazon rain forest. The World Resources Institute says  
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that as much as 20 million acres of forest were destroyed in Brazil in 1987 alone. Some scientists say the depletion of the rain forest is contributing to global warming, the so-called greenhouse effect.

Mr. Mendes's activities won him the enmity of the ranchers and other pro-development interests, whose views have until recently had the full support of the Brazilian Government. He was gunned down Dec. 22, 1988, in the backyard of his modest wooden home in Xapuri, 2,650 miles northwest of Rio de Janeiro.

Within days of the crime, the younger Mr. da Silva confessed to the killing, but he later retracted his confession. Many people close to Mr. Mendes assert that both da Silvas were carrying out the orders of far more powerful farmers who wanted Mr. Mendes dead. Human rights advocates have asked that the inquiry into Mr. Mendes's death be reopened.

#### 'Trial of the Century'

In his lifetime, Mr. Mendes was relatively little known in Brazil. But in death, he became a martyr for the ecological cause, known to millions worldwide. Some 240 people, including many foreign reporters and environmentalists, crammed into the tiny courtroom to follow the proceedings, which the national press has described as Brazil's "trial of the century."

The Associated Press quoted Marcio Thomaz Bastos, the chief prosecutor, as saying: "This is a historic trial not only for Brazil, but the world. In Brazil, it is a test case against reckless lawlessness, and for the world, a marker of whether or not man will allow the Amazon to be destroyed."

But the defense lawyers have said they will seek to tarnish Mr. Mendes's image. "We will show the world who Mendes was," Mr. Leal said. "He was not a saint."

In court today, Darci da Silva described how he waited in Mr. Mendes's backyard for his victim to appear. "I fired one shot," he said.

But some confusion arose over the murder weapon. Judge Adair Longhini showed him a 20-gauge shotgun, the purported-murder weapon. But Mr. da Silva said he killed Mr. Mendes with a 16-gauge shotgun.

#### Father on the Stand

The federal Police Chief, Romeu Tuma, who was in court, told reporters that the young man's confession could be a tactic to try to win acquittal for his father, who is accused of ordering the murder.

Because he was under 21 at the time of the crime, Darci da Silva could get a reduced sentence, Mr. Leal said.

After the son's confession, his father took the witness stand. When asked by the judge if he was involved in the murder, the gaunt Mr. da Silva, dressed in



Darci Alves da Silva, right, after confessing yesterday in a Brazilian court that he killed Chico Mendes, an Amazon environmental campaigner. Seated with him was his father and co-defendant, Darly.



Foreigners and Brazilians have descended on Xapuri for the Mendes murder trial.

jeans and shirt, said, "No, it is not true I did not participate."

The prosecution's main witness against the father is 15-year-old Genesio da Silva, who was raised on Mr. da

Silva's farm. The teen-ager, who is expected to take the stand later in the trial, has said that the elder Mr. da Silva plotted the murder at the farm.

Thousands of politicians, ordinary Brazilians and international observers have come to this village. Telephone trucks, television vans and food delivery trucks competed with carts pulled by horses and oxen as workers removed weeds in front of the one-room wooden courthouse.

#### Hammocks on Front Porches

Peasants from around the region have come to Xapuri in canoes, in mule- and steer-drawn carts, on horseback, by bus or on foot. Tents went up in the main square. Hammocks hung on front porches and mattresses were laid wherever there was a free space in people's homes.

The elder Mr. Da Silva's lawyers said that after this trial he is due to stand trial on charges of murdering three people in the southern state of Parana.

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