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Brazilian court acquits rancher accused of ordering U.S. nun's murder

by Lise Alves by Catholic News Service

SAO PAULO, Brazil (CNS) -- A Brazilian jury acquitted one of the ranchers accused of ordering the assassination of U.S. Sister Dorothy Stang in 2005.

Vitalmiro Bastos de Moura, known as Bida, was acquitted May 6 of ordering the killing of the nun, a member of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

Last year de Moura was sentenced to 30 years in prison for the crime, but according to Brazilian law every defendant sentenced to serve more than 20 years has the right to appeal the decision and demand a new trial.

Part of the reason for the acquittal was that Rayfran das Neves Sales, Sister Dorothy's confessed killer, said during his retrial that he alone was responsible for the killing. Sales said he felt threatened by the missionary and mistook her Bible for a gun.

In earlier depositions, Sales had accused de Moura of ordering Sister Dorothy's killing. The jury increased Sales' prison time from 27 to 28 years May 6.

Another farmer, Regivaldo Pereira Galvao, also has been accused of masterminding the plot with de Moura. Galvao has posted bail and is awaiting a trial date.

After the de Moura verdict was announced, commotion broke out on the steps of the court building, with Sister Dorothy's supporters protesting the decision. David Stang, her brother, told the daily newspaper *Folha de Sao Paulo* that he was very disappointed but would abide by the jury's decision. The prosecutor said he would appeal this latest decision.

Sister Dorothy was killed in Anapu, a remote community in the Amazon region.

Bishop Jose Azcona Hermoso of Marajo, in the Amazon, said he was shocked with the decision and that the population had to "wake up" and fight impunity before it was too late. Bishop Hermoso was in Brasilia May 6 with Bishops Flavio Giovenale of Abaetetuba and Erwin Krautler of Xingu to speak to the government's special human rights task force about death threats they have received due to their work in the Amazon.

Sister Dorothy, 73 at the time of her death, was a native of Dayton, Ohio, but had lived in the Amazon for nearly four decades and was a naturalized Brazilian citizen. She worked closely with the Brazilian bishops' Pastoral Land Commission, which said she had been receiving death threats for nearly four years due to her work with rural workers.

In 2005 another gunman, Clodoaldo Batista, testified against Sales and was sentenced to 18 years for the killing.

The middleman, Amair Feijoli da Cunha, known as Tato, was found guilty of hiring the two gunmen and was sentenced to 27 years in prison in 2006. However, due to a plea-bargaining arrangement with prosecutors, he will only spend 18 years in jail.

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