

The 2010 Right Livelihood Awards

Speech by

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Mister Speaker, Hon. Members of Parliament, dear Recipients of the Right Livelihood Award, Excellencies, dear Friends,

In this very special and unique moment I traverse the Atlantic Ocean in thoughts and emotions. I am leaving Stockholm for the southern hemisphere and embarking on the majestic Amazon, sailing up river to reach one of its major tributaries, the Xingu River. For forty-five years I have journeyed with the peoples of that region. They are the indigenous peoples who have lived there for thousands of years. They are the river people who have their homes on the river banks. They make their living from fishing and small family farming. They are the thousands and thousands of families who have migrated from all the States of Brazil in search of better living conditions during the last decades.

They are the people to whom I dedicate my life, they are the people whom I love and I know and they are the people who love me. The reason for that is simple: 45 years ago, in 1965, when I came to Brazil, to Amazonia, to the Xingu, they realized that I did not come in search of wealth or advantages. I came to serve these daughters and sons of God. They are women and men who journey with me. Together we defend their dignity, human rights and our environment, our common home on mother earth. Eco - logy - from the Greek οἶκος – means: "home"! These people know very well that they will not survive if Amazonia continues to be disrespected and razed. And they know that planet Earth will suffer irreversible consequences by this cruel destruction. This will be the true apocalypse.

It is a fact that those who are against the unscrupulous destruction of environment, against those, who have not the slightest respect for the human being, against those who seek immediate and incredible profits, who oppose the ambitions of many politicians and

entrepreneurs, put their lives at risk. Slander, defamation and death threats are the weapons to frighten and silence those who raise their voices against the aggressions to human dignity.

This is one of the reasons why the Public Security Authorities decided to put me under the protection of the Military Police of the state of Pará on June 29th, 2006.

These authorities consider themselves responsible “for the physical integrity of the bishop of the Xingu”. From that day on, armed military police accompany me wherever I am and go in my home-region around the Xingu. This evening, they have a day off.

I accept the Right Livelihood Award in the name of those who fight with me today, on behalf of the indigenous peoples, Amazonia and human rights. I accept it also in the name of the dozens of people who have given their lives, whose blood has been spilled and who were brutally assassinated because they opposed the systemised destruction of Amazonia. Among these murdered, I cite two people, who worked with me side by side.

US-American born Sister Dorothy Mae Stang lived twenty-three years on the Transamazon Highway and was murdered there in 2005. I remember my first meeting with her in 1982 very well. She said: “I want to work among the poorest of the poor.” It wasn’t the first time that someone spoke to me this way, and I told her several things to give her an idea about the reality at the Xingu. To my amazement, she didn’t ask any further question and started to live in the midst of the poor. From time to time she returned to Altamira, to get in contact with representatives of the administration to demand the rights of the farmers or denounce abuses and threats from land robbers or large land-holders.

It didn’t take that long for the first threats to appear. The self-called “owners” of the lands began to slander and defame her. This difficult, tiring and most exhausting life, Dorothy lived until that fateful Saturday, February 12th, 2005, until seven thirty in the morning, when she was shot. This crime was programmed in minute detail. Those responsible for her death were not those men who were convicted and who are in jail. It was the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2005 when I buried Sister Dorothy. Never in my life have I felt my heart so invaded by so many sentiments. Even today I cannot describe what I really felt at that moment.

The second person I want to remember here today is Ademir Alfeu Federicci called “Dema”. For many years a new category of conquistadors has appeared in Amazonia. They are the notorious land grabbers who usurp public lands. They use paramilitary forces to defend their interests. They use political and financial influence to maintain their ownership of immense areas of land. The families of small farmers are targeted by these so-called proprietors. One of these victims was Dema. Ademir Alfeu Federicci rose up against these proprietors. As a community leader, he always defended the rights of the small farmer and fought for better days for the rural man and woman. On August 23rd, 2001, Dema wrote a letter in support of the investigative work the Federal Police was doing on the land grabbers. Two days later he was brutally shot in his home in Altamira. He fell down in front of his wife Maria da Penha. His last words were: “Maria, take care of our children!” Then he passed away. Until today the investigation of Dema’s murder has not been completed. He was killed, because he raised his voice against the hydroelectric project of Belo Monte.

The Belo Monte Project appears to be sacrosanct, unquestionable and assumes the air of being a veritable historical subject. Human beings, families and communities are no longer protagonists of their own history. They were not heard, they were silenced before the project was planned and elaborated in Brasilia, a project that never took into consideration the legitimate rights and preoccupations of the population of the Xingu. All those who are quoting this project are immediately labeled as “enemies of progress”, or “against development”.

It is amazing, when we think of the size of Amazonia (a little more than half the size of the whole Brazil), that the principal problem has to do with the ownership (possession) and use of land. The majority of the other problems have their roots in this principal problem:

- Rural violence is linked to the concentration of land ownership and the most shameful impunity with which the criminals are honoured. They kill and nothing happens! If they are arrested, they will be released the next day! If they are convicted, they are circulating freely on the streets on the next day .

- There is a lack of public policy that encourages the preservation of Amazonia, this gigantic biome. Amazonia is “unique” its biodiversity is “exceptional”! Nothing in the whole world exists that is comparable to this region, the marvel of God`s creation. Brazil is responsible for the largest part of this biome, Amazonia.

- Another huge problem is the trafficking of human beings. Young people of both sexes are lured with the promises of a better life and ample wages into the exterior. They are caught in the international network of prostitution! They dream of waging a better life, they have dreams for the future. But they are forced to live in the hell of slavery and brutality.

Child-prostitution in Amazonia is often organized by people from the upper strata of society. They are politicians, business people or merchants. They lure, promise, use and abuse and nothing happens to these sexual criminals - corruption is their language.

This award has been given to me because of my commitment on behalf of the indigenous peoples, their human rights and dignity. I have always found a specific mission in defending these people, who are the survivors of centuries of massacres. In the decade of the 1980`s in the context of the National Constituent Assembly, we considered it our goal to implement indigenous rights in the Federal Constitution. It was essential to encourage the indigenous peoples` own leadership to assume their own protagonist action and to write their own story. We started to build an “alliance” between the indigenous peoples and organizations of the non-indigenous society.

Tonight, I take the opportunity to call the international community`s attention to the pain, despair and insecurity of the Guarani-Kaiowá people in South Mato Grosso. The indigenous people are confined to small areas, their young people see no prospect for their future and the suicide rate among them is alarmingly high. Factory owners who use modern slave labour are treated like heroes by the official administration. I am totally worried about the violation against the Guarani-Kaiowá. The current government is ignoring this cruel genocide in progress before their eyes. But we must not close our eyes to these crimes!

Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury! I gratefully accept the award on behalf of all these women and all these men who have been together with me in this struggle and who have never lost. I would like to thank all those, who have supported me during the last years, and those who have proposed my work to the Right Livelihood Award jury. I would like to express my deep gratitude for the Right Livelihood Award. I am honoured with the award at a moment, when our struggle on behalf of the indigenous people, dignity and human rights are taking on new dimensions and greater importance in the face of the development projects that threaten Amazonia. Those anti-ecological projects of enterprise will have a huge and destructive impact on everyone sitting here in Stockholm this evening, on all people living on earth.

I am honoured to accept this award by the Right Livelihood Foundation as international recognition and support of our total commitment to this work. I promise to continue for as long as God grants me life.

Thank you very much