

DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS



Father Henri de Roziers is not your average lawyer. At the heart of the Joao Canuto encampment in the Brazilian Amazon is an altar where this lawyer holds mass.

Father Henri has been working in Para state for 30 years defending the rights of the landless as part of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), a CAFOD partner.

“Without him we wouldn’t be here,” says Aleque Alvis dos Santos, 48. “He helps us a lot in our legal battle for land. He has a big heart and a good one. I think he was born for this work.”



The fight for land is a life and death struggle in this part of Brazil. Without it people often end up working for large landowners with a status similar to that of slaves.

Many of the people here have experienced it first hand. One group of people were employed to clear farmland for months without pay or even decent food or shelter.

Gunmen guarded the farm exits and entrances where they worked. Finally they escaped in a delivery van by telling the driver that they had finished their work and needed a ride to town.

Many workers are afraid to report what has happened to them for fear of reprisal

Others still bear scars where they were shot. At the end of their contracts their employers tried to kill them to avoid paying them their wages. They are fortunate to be alive.

The João Canuto encampment is named after an assassinated union leader – Father Henri says this is just one of 820 rural workers and union leaders killed since 1971.



He himself has received many death threats.

He notes: “Seventy per cent of cases have not been tried and few people are convicted or imprisoned. Many workers are afraid to report what has happened to them for fear of reprisal.”

“Even when the landowners have to pay it’s difficult getting the money from them, so the victim can be left with nothing.”

In a region where violence rules, the opportunity to farm your own small plot of land is a lifeline - which is why securing the legal right to the land is so crucial

Father Henri says: “We are trying to ensure a law gets passed that those farmers who are responsible for modern day slavery and killings lose their land.

“This bill was proposed years ago. It may take a long time to pass but it will change the power balance – it may create a new mentality and better conditions.”

“At least there is less slavery here now because we’ve done lots of work.”

Maria, who lives here with husband Edinaldo and daughter Taisa, hopes one day to plant her own crops to sell - but can only do so once the land has been legalized.

She says: “I don’t know how to describe how important or good it is to have Father Henri here.

“His solidarity, and just his presence - his humility of being with us, and the justice. At the end of the day he is our lawyer.”