Amazon under siege: An interview with environmental and human rights defender Claudelice dos Santos

Claudelice dos Santos (1) interviewed by Victor Porto Almeida (2) and Larissa Bombardi (3)

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Abstract:
Claudelice dos Santos is a human rights defender who holds a bachelor’s degree in law and who is the coordinator of the "Instituto Zé Claudio e Maria" - an organization for human and environment rights. She became a well-recognised human rights defender through her struggle for justice following the killing of her brother José Claudio Ribeiro dos Santos and his wife, Maria do Espírito Santo, in 2011. Claudelice had fought alongside her brother and sister-in-law for the right to access to land and denounced human rights violations resulting from land grabbing, logging, and crimes against the environment. She was subjected to several threats due to her human rights activities. Claudelice is one of the nominees for the 2019 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, organised by the European Parliament. The interview was conducted in December of 2021 by the geographer Larissa Bombardi, currently based in Belgium, and Victor de Almeida, a lawyer and PhD candidate, based in UK.
Victor Porto Almeida: Good morning Claudelice,

Larissa Bombardi: How are you, Claudelice?

Claudelice dos Santos: Fine, thanks. As I was about to tell you, this is the third time that I’m not in my region at the end of the year, since 2019, when I received one of the death threats. They put a note in the mailbox at my mother’s house that reads: “we’re going to kill the rest”, I mean, the rest of the family, right? This is because we have been fighting for justice in the case of José and Maria until today. [Respectively Claudelice’s brother and sister-in-law who were murdered]

Larissa Bombardi: It was 10 years ago, right?

Claudelice dos Santos: 10 years this year. So, I’m not staying in my region at the end of the year, because unfortunately, this is the period when we are vulnerable. Because the government bodies go into recess, because the police act, but they act less... And, in these years of the Bolsonaro government things have only gotten worse.

We cannot put our lives at risk, nor our families’ lives at risk, so we always make an assessment when the end of the year is approaching, we analyse the risk that we might run. This year, as I was coming to the COP [the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference, in Glasgow], we assessed that by coming to the COP - where logically we denounce all the violence that we suffer, that our communities suffer - we assessed that it would be good for me to stay here for a while longer; because we knew that there would be a lot of pressure, and that the threats would be intense. And the result was exactly as we had foreseen: the indigenous leaders Alessandra Munduruku’s house was invaded, Chay received death threats, because there is no point in thinking: “ah, but it’s only through the internet”. No. These threats reach us in a very violent way, both emotionally and physically.

These narratives of hatred that have been created against environmental advocates, human rights defenders, they come into our lives, right? In a very violent way, so we were right in our assessment. I’m sorry to be away from my family, but it’s not something I do because I like it. No, it’s rather a matter of safety.

So much so that some defenders who returned to Brazil after the COP are not in their regions. We have to go on what we call self-exile, stay somewhere else in order to preserve our lives.

In 2019, I left with my family, because it’s not easy, you know what I mean. My mother is 84 years old. Just imagine a lady, her daughter goes to the mailbox to pick up something, get a postcard and there’s a message that they are going to kill her. Since Zé Cláudio and Maria were murdered, we have been getting threats. They are normally not material threats, this was the first material threat, with a piece of paper with something written on it. The other threats were phone calls. They were messages, so it’s difficult to point out who threatened. Including with regard to the note, it’s up to the police to investigate this.

L.B.: I know what you are talking about. As you know I had to leave Brazil myself too for similar reasons. It’s difficult because all this has a serious emotional component.

C.S.: Yes, of course, this is the modus operandi of crime, you know, Larissa? The hurt you have suffered is exactly what the defenders, in the forefront, at the grassroots, experience in a much more violent way. I imagine that with the visibility that you have, because you are an important researcher, right? It’s a shame that our country is not capable of protecting us, of protecting you, of
protecting the other advocates that are fighting to say, look: “if our country continues like this, it will destroy itself, it will destroy the rest of the world. Because that is what is happening. Our country is uncapable of defending us, and we should denounce it. I know that you’re not in our country today, but I know that your work is important. It’s very important. Are you aware of what happened in my state, in Barcarena? This is what you say in your work, and this is what the communities there that suffer these violations are denouncing. This goes for two or three days in the newspaper, then they forget. But life goes on, you have your children, I have my daughters, and nothing happens. This is what we must report and we simply see our lives increasingly at risk.

L.B.: I know, it is horrible. And you lost your brother and your sister-in-law.

C.S.: He was that person who was the pillar of the family, the strong one in the family. We looked at him and we knew we could trust him. Even today I remembered him, because of this sequel, of that accident, he and Maria were the ones who helped me that day. The accident happened there on the plot, and he was the one who was there. So, when the murder happened, I took too long, too long to believe it. I think it took me more than three years for me to ‘realize’ and for us to transform the pain of mourning and fear. Because it is overwhelming. You don’t believe it! You just don’t believe it. And it’s very sad because 10 years have passed and justice hasn’t been served. We are still fighting for justice, with other defenders who are in the same situation.

L.B.: Because impunity is what gives strength, right Claudelice?

C.S.: That’s it! In our country, especially in the North, there’s the coronelismo. The one in charge is who has the financial and political power, who has connections with powerful politicians. If you don’t have that, if you’re poor, if you want to report something, you’re bound to die. If you try to report, you’ll be rejected, you know? You’ll be criminalised, disqualified. You can see the example of this in the media. It’s being normalized, as if it was just one more thing happening. But it is not that, in the meantime, our lives go on being violently affected by this normalization of violence. So, here we are 10 years later, and still fighting for justice, and we are standing firm and strong.

I would say that I cry a lot less, because there are times when it’s necessary to talk. It hurts, it never goes away, but it’s necessary. Because just like the situation José and Maria had in the past, the threats they have suffered, they have fought and denounced, and got absolutely nothing back from the State, not even a simple investigation of the denunciations, everything keeps happening the same way. And, Larissa, my sincere and honest opinion is that I don’t see this getting better in the next few years. There is a need for a major revolution in our country so that the defenders of the land, waters, forests and territories are respected as they should be.

And I don’t see this possibility happening in the next few years. We will still lose many defenders, many people. And this is not what we want. We don’t want more martyrs, we don’t need more martyrs. We need serious public policies. We need to be respected. So, whenever people ask me what I have to say, about how one can help, I think that the solution is through the education of the youth. It is the youth who are going to continue this fight, so we should put our focus on them. Those politicians are not going to change their minds anymore. They’ve already chosen their side, and it’s not ours. Now—more than ever—we have to talk to young people about what’s going on. And they already know this will affect their lives.

L.B.: When you talk about young people, you mean young people in the communities or in general in the country?
C.S.: In general. From the communities and in general, from those who have no connection with this environmental struggle to those who belong to some territory as well. And not only with discourses. We don’t need nice discourses anymore. We hear fine speeches at the COP. What I saw and heard at this COP, you say “guys, as of tomorrow, all the issues of the world will be resolved”. But that’s not the case. In our real life, it is completely different. The agreements made here will never get there, not in a positive way. Because this was not the first and will not be the last COP, and the speeches, you can write down in your notebook: they’ll be the same. At the next COP, it will be the same discourse. The delegation that came from Brazil... Have you seen the list? There’s the first lady, there’s I don’t know who, except the defenders, right? So, now is the time for us to fight, the youth, today’s youth have to take a stand. It’s not only in speeches and not only on the social network. Is social networking important? It matters, but our actions, our practices are what will really make a difference. They will affect today’s world in a way that will have consequences hundreds of years from now. So youth is an important element, politics is an important element. People say: “ah, I don’t discuss politics, but I like the environment”. That’s wrong, you have to like politics too. Because Bolsonaro’s policy is one of destruction and death. Both for the environment and for the people in Brazil, that’s what is destroying the future of this generation. So, you have to discuss politics.

V.P.A.: You spoke about two major problems we have: one is the issue of public policies and the other, which you put in other words, is about the many incidents occurring against defenders, incidents of rights violations. And, these incidents are not investigated in a satisfactory manner. Today, what would you say is the most sensitive issue in Brazil? Do you think that our public policies towards the environment are insufficient or that we do not have mechanisms to preserve the discourse of those who fight for fairer environmental policies for future generations?

C.S.: Look, I would say that it’s a combination of all of this, right? But regarding the laws and mechanisms, we have them. But the words speak much louder than the actions. The public policies of the Bolsonaro regime practically don’t exist, because he destroyed those that existed. To such an extent that you see ICMBio and IBAMA [two bodies of the Ministry of the Environment] hindered by this government. And all this associated with impunity.

Impunity is the main factor that causes the threats against defenders of human rights and the environment to continue. Ten years later, we are fighting to arrest the person who ordered the killing of José and Maria. And yesterday, I can say—yesterday—there was violence, a violation, some peasants were murdered. Yes, they organise themselves like a rural militia, they attack the camps with bullets, with shots, with fire, they burn all the people’s belongings and there is not even a single investigation. And, with the support of the government... From micro to macro level, from an attack, from a veiled threat, to public policies: all this is what is maintaining this state of violence and destruction.

That’s why I tell you that I have no hope that this will be changing soon. Because if another president comes in the elections in 2022, everything that Bolsonaro has been dismantling, everything that he has been doing to strengthen the militia, and also the policies he’s been dismantling that could minimize these impacts and this violence, will have to be restructured. So this will not happen from one year to the next.

L.B.: Claudelice, do you see any clear difference in the Amazon after the Bolsonaro government?

C.S.: Absolutely! First, the same year Bolsonaro was elected, what happened? Fire! The farmers got together to set fires all together, because they knew that the Bolsonaro government is a carte blanche government to have people killed, and to destroy the environment. Then came deforesta-
tion, great violence and invasion of land and territories of traditional communities as well as indigeneous peoples and the *Quilombola*, who are peoples who preserve the environment. And then the hate speeches: “but the ones who burn are the small farmers, the big landowners don’t need to deforest any more”. This is a big lie, this is a narrative created to criminalize and disqualify family workers, traditional peoples, indigenous peoples, the *Quilombola*, and to say that farmers are good and they are not! The meat that goes to the United Kingdom, to Europe, to the United States and so on, comes out of areas of conflict, areas of slaughter.

**V.P.A.:** And what do you think is the role of digital militias? And the dissemination of fake news for the escalation of these conflicts?

**C.S.:** The main role is to justify the violence, to justify the murders and to convince people who believe the fake news that those who defend the environment, the people who fight for the land, for the water, that these are bums and that they really deserve to be treated with the harsh rigor of the law. The law does exist for the defenders. However, for the real criminals who are the farmers, the miners, the State itself through its major projects that lead to environmental destruction, the law does not exist. So, this is the role of fake news, the role of hate narratives in the media. There is certain congressman from Pará who said that these indigenous people who have a telephone are “fake indigenous people”! This is the narrative that has been created to say that the indigenous people can’t have a mobile phone, if they have one, then, they can’t use the land. Something else, when I talked about justifying the deaths and murders, when there’s an attack against peasants, like the one that happened in the Sáo Vinicius and Nova Ipixuna camp, where José and Maria were murdered, they say: “ah, but they attacked the farmer”. Guys, it was the farmer with more than 30 pickup trucks with armed personnel that attacked the camp. They invaded a camp where people live in houses made of straw, they set fire to the camp, they tortured, they shot. There is a person who suffered a stroke, who will no longer be able to work, can you believe it? And to say that they deserved this? This is what is going on in the internet. So, the fake news on social media are increasing. The criminalization and violence against those people who defend the right and access to land, territory and forest, this is what fake news has been used for. And, I could give many other examples, but these for me are the most striking, they are the ones that directly affect our flesh, that cut our flesh, because in addition to dying, we are guilty of our own death, and this is in the judgment that acquits the farmer who ordered the killing of José Cláudio and Maria back in 2013.

**L.B.:** Really? How are the proceedings going?

**C.S.:** It was sentenced that Zé Cláudio and Maria contributed to their own deaths...

**V.P.A.:** Did the case go to a Jury, Claudelice?

**C.S.:** It was a People's Jury. It’s stated as follows: first for Zé and then for Maria, because Zé Cláudio in some way contributed to her murder, because there were three people judged in 2013, the mastermind and two executors. But this is part of the common reasoning of people who think that “they have to die anyway, because they hinder development”.

**L.B.:** I know, I know. It’s like saying that a woman who wears a miniskirt deserves to be raped.

**C.S.:** This is even a justification that is used a lot in violence against women in rapes, in feminicides: “she looked for it”. This is also used against human rights defenders.

**V.P.A.:** Claudelice, in your brother’s case, did the Public Prosecutor appeal the judgment of acquit-
C.S.: Yes, there was this first trial in 2013 where there was this absurdity. That day I felt as if they had killed Zé and Maria again. I couldn’t hear the end of the sentence. Do you know that lump in your throat, that cry you need to give? I just screamed and left. My sister outside was sick. Maria’s sister suffered a stroke suddenly.

L.B.: Oh my God!

C.S.: To this day she is paralysed on one side of her body. She had a series of health consequences. Because that’s the way it is, besides killing us, they criminalize us and say that we deserve to die. We have appealed, there was a request for annulment. We presented several requests, the first was an action for annulment of the judgment of the farmer who ordered the crime and to keep up the conviction of the two executors. We also requested a change of jurisdiction to the capital, because it was clear that Marabá, that the People’s Jury in Marabá was not impartial. The whole process, including the judge’s attitude was not impartial, and this culminated in the result that we had, the acquittal of the person who ordered the crime. So, we gathered all these requests, and in 2016 there was a second trial, only of the mastermind, and he was sentenced to 60 years in prison.

V.P.A.: So there was an annulment? There was an appeal from the prosecution asking for the previous People’s Jury to be annulled because the Jury’s decision was completely against the evidence included on the case records?

C.S.: Conviction... with everything, absolutely everything.

V.P.A.: There was then a new trial in 2016 to be submitted, and there was a suspension as well?

C.S.: That’s exactly right. There was also a suspension. The second trial was in Belém, it was in the capital, all our requests were granted. The conviction of the two executors was upheld, the acquittal of the farmer was annulled, and the case was remanded to the capital. In the second trial, already in the capital, the conviction was upheld and the judge in the capital made a point of asking the People’s Jury questions similar to those in the first trial.

L.B.: Ah, it was a People’s Jury...

C.S.: Both were People’s Jury, with completely different results. In the second trial, in 2016, the People’s Jury said no, that Zé Cláudio and Maria did not contribute to their killing. A completely different result.

It involves the issue whether it is the result of fake news, and what impact that has. For example, in the capital people have much more access to information, they have much more access to resources to know if a news story is fake or not. In the interior, what happens there is by word of mouth: “José Cláudio and Maria were hindering the development of the municipality of Nova Ipixuna”. The farmers and the loggers from Nova Ipixuna protested, closed the BR saying that IBAMA was there closing the logging companies, and that was the families’ livelihood, you know? This is the narrative that is used to justify a murder. So, when the first People’s Jury was held in 2013, that was in people’s heads: “they did deserve to die, because they were hindering the development of the municipality,” “because those logging companies, poor logging companies, employ a lot of people.” I say this with complete confidence because I live there, and I hear what people say about those who fight for the land: “they’re all bums, they only want the land to sell it later, they really deserve a beating”. “The least they can have is to be beaten, they have to die”. You know, so this makes me very outraged,
even today I can’t talk about this and not stay outraged.

**V.P.A.** You said that you even lodged appeals in this period, and obviously, so, the Public Prosecutor’s Office is the holder of a criminal action. In this case, did you also have a lawyer acting as an assistant prosecutor?

**C.S.** Yes, I mean, we, precisely because we had, we had, no, we have! The organisation that never left our side is the *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* [Pastoral Land Commission], which has lawyers from the CPT, and the SDDH, which is another organisation from the capital. I say ‘we’ because throughout the process we were there together, looking for strategies and giving support to the Public Prosecutor, to appeal and also to make the accusation.

**V.P.A.** I see, and after this trial in 2016, in which there was the conviction, what steps were taken? I imagine that the defence must have appealed against the sentence.

**C.S.** They did not appeal.

**V.P.A.** So it has been passed as a final judgment?

**C.S.** So he—the mastermind— was convicted.

**L.B.** But he’s free?

**C.S.** He’s been free since 2013, since the first trial in which he was acquitted, in which he walked out the front door, he has remained free since then! The second trial was in absentia. He was not present, he was never put back in jail.

**L.B.** And there’s no warrant?

**C.S.** That’s why we’re now going to appeal to the Inter-American Court.

**L.B.** But the person is convicted and not arrested?

**V.P.A.** So there was no enforcement of the judgement? Of the sentence?

**C.S.** No, no, there wasn’t because he on the run.

**L.B.** Oh, he’s on the run?

**C.S.** So there is no justice, Victor and Larissa. There is none! It’s a network, when I say it’s a militia, it’s because there are masterminds, there are intermediaries. I consider the farmer who ordered the crime an intermediary mastermind, I don’t even consider him a rich farmer. He went to the side of these rich farmers who wanted Zé Cláudio and Maria dead, politicians, businessmen, do you understand? And there’s the third on the scale, the gunmen.

**L.B.** You know, Claudelice, I studied geography and when I was in my third year I went to the Amazon, to this region of southeast Para. One of our teachers, Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira, took us there, and we were received by the CPT. And I remember that at that time there was Dom Tomás Balduíno who gave the data on impunity. I remember that less than 1% of the perpetrators have been sentenced.
C.S.: It's still the same. The same goes on.
L.B.: 30 years have passed and nothing changed.

C.S.: So much so that the Eldorado dos Carajás massacre continues unpunished. Massacre of Pau D'Arco The Pau D'Arco massacre was yesterday. The other one, at the beginning of this year Fernando was murdered, a survivor of the massacre. Nothing is happening, nothing at all. And it’s getting worse.

V.P.A.: You said that now you're going to appeal to the Court, but I imagine that you are going to file a petition with the Commission, right? Because the Commission, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, takes it to the Court. And what arguments do you intend to bring so that this matter can be accepted by the Court? Because there are several criteria for the Court to accept a matter of human rights violation.

C.S.: Well, we still have an appointment to meet, so, I will go back to Brazil in January, at the very beginning of the year. And then we will sit down, our family, the members of the Comissão Pastoral da Terra and the SDDH, and we will formulate the best strategies. But for sure, the man who ordered the crime still being on the run to this day, and his prison sentence ordered in the second trial, never having been carried out, is one of the factors and one of the arguments.

V.P.A.: So, what are your expectations with regard to taking this case to the Court, for example, for you as human rights advocates? Because let's make a comparison. The Maria da Penha law was produced as a result of a condemnation of the Brazilian State by the Inter-American Court for failing in its duty to protect a woman. If we look at the post-dictatorship Amnesty Law, for example, it was also...Exactly... And today the cases conducted by the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office to investigate enforced disappearances, people who disappeared during the dictatorship, are also the result of a condemnation by the Inter-American Court. So, by taking the of your brother and your sister-in-law before the Court, what would your expectation be? Would it be that Brazil should create a similar defence mechanism? Would it be to seek accountability for the perpetrators? What do you expect from all this?

C.S.: We expect both things and perhaps more. Yes, we do expect the State to be held accountable, not least because José Cláudio and Maria have for many years denounced the destruction of the environment and the impinging on human rights, not only against them, but against the community. So the least we can expect is a condemnation of this country, which has never made an effort to protect the community and the environment. What we really expect is that the State is held accountable, and we hope the enforcement of these sentences that were handed down and that were not carried out. The threats against us persist, so we hope that this will at least close or turn the page on the threats against us. The only thing we want is to stay alive and have justice, we don't want anything more than that. And not only for us, for so many other defenders of land and territory who are still in the same situation.

V.P.A.: Would you say that there is today an institution, and here I am talking about the institution itself, not a person, that you can count on, I am talking about a State institution that is involved in the fight for the rights of the forest, the protection of the environment?

C.S.: I'm sorry to tell you, but, no. We don't trust them at all.

V.P.A.: Not even the Federal Public Prosecutor, the Public Defender's Office?
C.S.: When we blow the whistle, it’s because we want some support, a backing to say: “Look, we are going to blow the whistle on this”, but we don’t see anything concrete happening. So, it’s impossible for me to say that I trust them. But we continue using these agencies, these spaces, because it’s their responsibility to investigate, it’s their responsibility to minimize these impacts against the environment, against our lives.

V.P.A.: Now, would you say that your lack of trust is due to their slowness, that is, their delay in acting, or is it because you don’t believe in the actors that are in these institutions who are in charge of the cases?

C.S.: The first thing is impunity. Not only in the case of my brother and my sister-in-law. This is historical. The second thing is sluggishness. We don’t see anything happening. The accusations that Zé and Maria made, let’s play here... 1999, 2000, 2001... The same year they were murdered, you look for the result of that, and there’s no result. They died because they reported things in the 2000s, you know? In 2001. They died in 2011. Victor, there’s never been an investigation, nothing at all! So, how can I trust these institutions? No! After they were murdered, the mastermind was acquitted. I can’t trust them. But it is their responsibility to deal with that. So that’s why we keep denouncing, and that’s the reason why we will continue to report, even if completely hopeless.

L.B.: What do you think about pressure coming from the outside, for example, from Europe? Would you see it in a positive light?

C.S.: Yes, I would see it in a positive light because it can give us a breath of fresh air. At least if we are denouncing the case before the Inter-American Court. We can go to sleep and say: we are doing something, because the case of José and Maria, if it’s accepted by the Court, may have repercussions in many other cases, and this is what we see when we report to other international courts, to other countries, to the European Union or the United Kingdom. Just now a Member of the European Parliament was in Belém, Pará. We did everything we could to take Josias, who was one of the people tortured in the São Vinicius camp, to see if this could at least give us a glimmer of hope that something might change. On the same day he had a meeting, this Member of the European Parliament had a meeting with the governor of Pará, and what we hope is that such a violence will decrease, that we will really be treated with dignity, such as we deserve. Although, we know that this meeting won’t solve all our problems and we’ll have to keep denouncing.

V.P.A.: Based on common sense, let’s say, it wouldn’t be rational for you to go on exposing yourself to so much risk, when you know, for example, that there is a real threat that they can commit violence against you or your family, or that they can kill your family or your friends, but this is a cause that you are still supporting. And, there is a motivation behind it, what is your motivation to keep fighting so fiercely for a cause that is so dangerous, but which is also so necessary?

C.S.: It’s justice, you know? Justice for our dead people. We don’t want any more deaths. Justice for the environment, because that’s where our life is. And it’s from there that we will continue to exist. So it’s for justice and for our environment. And furthermore, why should I stop condemning, stop asking for justice, while Zé and Maria have fought their whole lives, right? While Fernando, who was murdered at the beginning of the year, was reporting the killing of his 10 comrades who were murdered in the Pau D’Arco massacre. Why? Why should we stop? No, we must continue. They were brave. We have to be brave too. If they didn’t have the support of the State, neither do we, but we have created our own defence mechanisms, which are our voice, the reporting on the Brazilian state that does nothing, and should do. It is the fight for justice. I think that what keeps us moving is our
instinct for survival, and not just surviving now. I have two daughters, I am going to have grandchildren, you certainly want to have your life, your children, your grandchildren alive enjoying quality of life. That is my main motivation. I can’t stop now because they didn’t stop, so we shouldn’t stop either.

V.P.A.: And you said that state institutions are showing a complete collapse and are failing to provide the protection that human rights defenders and environmental defenders need, but would you say that there are institutions, not necessarily state institutions, but institutions that can effectively bring about the kind of effectiveness that you’re seeking, be they non-profit organisations, civil associations and so on?

C.S.: Yes, and it’s them and it’s through them that we continue to have access to these other mechanisms of justice that are missing in Brazil, such as the Court. I will cite one that has always been on our side, whether in the legal field or in the field of our work in the communities, whether it be agroecological production, sustainable production, or with the women’s groups organizations, which is the CPT [Pastoral Land Commission]. The CPT is doing work that is essential to the communities they support. It has always been on our side. Since the creation of the settlement, every time we needed training in sustainable production, for example, a SAF [Agroforestry System], or with organizing the women’s group, they were there. And even in the legal field, so, the non-governmental organizations are also giving us the energy to keep going. Imagine if we only had the State as a partner? That same State that I just said is slow, that doesn’t do its job as it should, like INCRA [National Institute for Colonisation and Agrarian Reform], which doesn’t resolve land issues, like IBAMA, which doesn’t resolve issues of violence against the environment. This State that often kills, as it happened in the Pau D’Arco massacre, or like in Eldorado, or that is negligent, like in the case of Zé and Maria, that failed to investigate the complaints of death threats. So, in these organisations we place our hope that we will continue to stand up because if no one is listening, we are together, doing something for ourselves. And this is the work that we do with the Zé Cláudio e Maria Institute, which we have created to give support to other defenders and also to the local communities.

You know, here in Europe, during this week I was in London, visiting schools, telling this same story, with less intensity, because there are many young people, some of them children, so I can’t give details, and one of them asked me this same question that you asked me, Victor, why I keep doing something that is so dangerous and why I smile and make fun sometimes. Because they can’t take away our smile too, you know? They will win when we stop smiling. They will win when we stop fighting. The bodies of Zé and Maria and so many other defenders are buried, but their story is not! Their story must be told. And we must tell it smiling, because Zé and Maria were great, they were giants, who did a lot for the community, for the environment, and this must be remembered. What they, Chico Mendes, Dorothy, and so many other defenders did for their causes. And they will not win, because we will keep fighting and smiling, when I pass away, you will be there, others will be there, my daughters will be there, they will tell this story. That’s the reason why I tell their story, the most beautiful parts, because their story must remain engraved in our minds and hearts.

V.P.A.: How important do you think it is for the movement that you’re a woman, that you’re a member of a minority and that you give voice to all this discourse? In what way do you think that helps to legitimize the struggle, or even to push the struggle, and even to inspire other people?

C.S.: What I hope with this is to inspire people, mainly to fight for justice, you know? If your community is being destroyed, you should fight for it, whether you are a woman, whether you are young, whether you are any kind of minority. Actually, it was said that we are the minority, but we are not the minority, we are the majority. Black people are the majority, women are the majority. The cabo-
clo people - because where I come from the brown people are the caboclo people - the caboclo people are the majority, so we have to advocate for ourselves, we have to speak out and occupy these spaces that were historically refused to us and we shouldn’t remain silent. We can’t let our heads drop! We won’t let the violence that we and our ancestors suffered be forgotten, and we have to use this as a tool to fight for justice.

V.P.A.: What are your expectations? What kind of repercussion do you expect from your participation in the COP? That is, on returning afterwards to your community.

C.S.: It’s what I said, I’ll repeat it, in our real life, nothing that was said here will have an immediate positive effect, nothing... These are discourses that, honestly, are already gone with the wind, I don’t know where. I tell you that because my reality is a harsh reality, it’s a tough reality. And, everything that was said here, everything that I heard on television, because there was no dialogue here, there was no dialogue here, you know? And that bunch in a suit and tie didn’t listen at all to what the defenders who were here had to say. And, we were in the streets, we were in those parallel meetings, and those people who were there behind closed doors, where we couldn’t get in, you know? Because they had huge security guards that wouldn’t let anyone come through those doors. Wherever the Heads of State were, we couldn’t even see those people. So honestly, in our real life, things will remain as they are. These speeches that were made here are not going to have a positive impact.

V.P.A.: So you believe that your coming here to attend the COP won’t have any kind of consequences, either positive or negative?

C.S.: I am totally hopeless about this COP. We can talk in a year’s time, when the next COP is coming up, what positive things might happen? I will tell you, and it will be the same thing I am telling you now - no hope that it will positively change our lives. Is this a place where we should stop going? No, we should go because that’s where these negotiations take place, and if we simply don’t participate, it reverberates in our lives in a negative way. The UN needs to change this style of COP. I think this is a huge elephant that we can’t reach. It’s there, it’s beautiful, but we have no real voice in the spaces where the decisions take place. Do you know what was negotiated there? Because, I don’t know! Three days, two or three days of the COP, they made a big announcement, I don’t know how many rich countries, of God knows how many millions, I don’t know how many resources for indigenous peoples. Do you know how many indigenous peoples there are who are suffering and being affected all over the world? These rich people are going to send this money to these States. Do you have any hope that this money will reach the communities?

L.B.: No.

C.S.: That’s exactly the same feeling we have. And this was just a public negotiation about this, but there were several other negotiations. Do you know who was at the negotiating table? Agribusiness, big mining companies... Were there any peoples and communities together in these negotiations? That’s the reason why I’m telling you, total hopelessness. I am speaking here and in a year’s time you will ask me again: “Clau, what positive things happened here at the last COP to reduce violence, to...”. Because one thing is certain: it’s no use talking about climate change and environmental protection without talking about the indigenous peoples...about the people, about the violated bodies. The violated bodies are the result of such crime against the environment. There is no point in putting things in separate boxes, because they are not separate. Violence against the environment first violates people. It’s the herd! When the herd arrives, the gunmen have gone before, the bullets have been fired, the tractor has gone, the pasture has been cleared. So, violence has to be seen as a whole, and not just one aspect or another.
**V.P.A.**: For environmental and human rights defenders, what do you think next year’s elections will mean and what risk does it pose to you?

**C.S.**: The proceedings for next year’s elections have already started. And it has started in a very violent way mainly for us. And it represents many things, including our well-being, our lives. If with Bolsonaro’s first election it was already this, all this madness against us, imagine if he wins again. But, on the other hand, we understand that, for example, if someone else wins, it won’t have a positive response overnight either. Justice is really very slow. And the Bolsonaro government staying in power means death and destruction. And, another person winning, we have several ranges of scenarios. For example, if Lula wins, we already know that we will at least have an opening for dialogue, something that didn’t happen in the Dilma government and will happen much less in the Bolsonaro’s. So, at least we have this hope. I would say that in the worst case scenario we’ll fight at least for a government which engages in dialogue, which at least talks to the people.

**L.B.**: At least, human rights are on the agenda, aren’t they?

**C.S.**: Indeed! Because it’s no use saying that the previous leftist governments were in favour of the environment, because they weren’t. Belo Monte is an evidence of that.

**L.B.**: They weren’t. With all the pain in the world we have to say that they really weren’t.

**C.S.**: All the pain in the world. I am a leftist and I know. I am not someone from the centre, I am not from the right, I am from the left! And I know that the left-wing governments need to be much better than they have been. Because it’s no use putting human rights, environment protection on their agendas and approving Belo Monte, approving the anti-terror law, which even today is used against us. It’s no use. I have serious criticisms, but between Bolsonaro and Lula, I definitely prefer Lula, there is no comparison.

**V.P.A.**: How was this pandemic period for you, in terms of vulnerability issues? Do you think your vulnerability has increased? Have you been more exposed? In short, because there were various restrictions, the State refrained from mediating in various conflicts, or do you think that nothing has changed?

**C.S.**: Things changed for the worse, didn’t they? The vulnerability of being both infected and murdered and nothing happening has only made things worse. For example, the attacks on communities increased. From that you can imagine the level of vulnerability that these people had. On the one hand, contamination, the failing State, and on the other hand, the militia organisations that are much stronger, because they have their own resources to keep themselves in their cars and the gunmen operating inside their comfortable homes. So, the level of vulnerability was very great. These people that manage to keep themselves protected while the gunmen are active, much more empowered than the farmers that had to stay locked up inside their homes, the people were even more isolated, without support from the State and with the gunmen invading their territories. Panic, there was panic. There was no protection from the pandemic, nor was there social isolation, because we had to fight all the time to bring aid into the community, to some vulnerable communities.

There was no protection from the pandemic, and I don’t know if you understand what I mean by protection. To be protected is to stay quiet, sheltered. Because we had to keep fighting the same way and now with even more sluggishness from the State. Everything is online. Some communities don’t even have mobile phones, they have no signal at all. How can everything be ‘online’ in an isolated
community? There are some communities that have no contact with the outside world, unless they move around, you know? So it was very tense time! The vulnerability was at an absurd level.

**V.P.A.:** Is there a direct fight, for example, against the big companies, the manufacturers of pesticides and also their emissaries?

**C.S.:** Absolutely. These projects from the State, these projects that are supported and that are not State projects, but that are supported by the State with these major organisations. I don’t know if you remember that I mentioned if you are aware of what happened in my state, in Pará? In Barcarena, which is this big [mining] company.

But there are a lot of things there. Those communities have been reporting poison contamination there for a long time and nothing ever happens, so the big companies don’t surprise me, they are direct allies of the State! They have support from the State, they have the backing of the state to go on throwing poison into the communities and absolutely nothing happens! Accidents with chemicals happen, like the one happening now, and nobody even knows what it is. Nothing will happen like in the Mariana’s dam disaster, like with the hydroelectric dams that are installed in the communities and nothing happens, so these companies are great allies of the State. And they are as dangerous as the farmers who have gunmen at their service, as the miners who attack the communities. So they are just as dangerous, but they have more money to cover it all very well, and all of it covered with the help of the State. That’s exactly that.

**L.B.:** That’s it. Claudelice, thank you so much! I was already an admirer of yours and now I admire you even more.

**C.S.:** And put it there for the world to know, for the world to listen, for the people to read about what is happening and become aware and take our side, to come to our side.

The more people on our side, touched by this cause, the better it is for us.

Better for us to make the violence happening become more visible. That’s what I say: understand that after I began coming here [to Europe], the first time was in 2017 - I was talking to my friend yesterday - people here, who are not there, they need to know, right? And they will only know if we talk, because they have no idea what it’s like to be on your land and a farmer says he’s the owner and evicts you. And you can’t stand right, because you can’t have your reason acknowledged, and you dying for that and someone saying that you deserved to die. No one should have to go through this.
Claudelice Dos Santos, is a human rights defender who holds a bachelor’s degree in law and who is the coordinator of the “Instituto Zé Claudio e Maria” - an organization for human and environment rights. She became a well-recognised human rights defender through her struggle for justice following the killing of her brother José Claudio Ribeiro dos Santos and his wife, Maria do Espírito Santo, in 2011. Claudelice had fought alongside her brother and sister-in-law for the right to access to land and denounced human rights violations resulting from land grabbing, logging, and crimes against the environment. She was subjected to several threats due to her human rights activities. Claudelice is one of the nominees for the 2019 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, organised by the European Parliament.

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Larissa Bombardi, is an Associate Professor at Department of Geography – University of São Paulo – Brazil, currently living in Brussels. She is a specialist on the subject of pesticides use for the last 12 years, with dozens of lectures, several published articles and more than 100 interviews given on the matter, in national (Brazil) and international means of communication. She is the author of the atlases: “A Geography of Agrotoxins Use in Brazil and its Relations to the European Union”, launched in 2019 in its English edition in Europe (Scotland and Germany) and “Geography of Asymmetries: molecular colonialism and poisoning Circle in Trade Relations Between Mercosur and European Union”, launched in 2021 at European Parliament. She is also a member of the National Forum to Combat the Impacts of Pesticides (Brazil) and Board Member of the international organization “Justice Pesticide”.