



Source: Frontline Defenders

TRIALWATCH TO MONITOR TRIAL OF BRAZILIAN HUMAN RIGHTS LAWYER JOSÉ VARGAS SOBRINHO

This statement can be attributed to a spokesperson for the Clooney Foundation for Justice. For further inquiries, please contact media@cfj.org.

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TrialWatch, a Clooney Foundation for Justice initiative, announced today that it will monitor the trial of Brazilian lawyer and human rights defender José Vargas Sobrinho Junior. Mr. Vargas is a well-known advocate for rural and indigenous communities in Brazil whose representation of the victims of the 2017 [Pau D'Arco massacre](#)—where 10 land defenders were killed by police—has resulted in harassment and threats to him and his family. He now faces a range of charges including qualified homicide, which carries a potential sentence of 12 to 30 years in prison. TrialWatch [monitors criminal proceedings around the world](#), grades their fairness, and [advocates](#) for individuals who are unfairly detained.

The authorities have accused Mr. Vargas and four co-defendants of involvement in the murder of Cicero José Rodrigues de Souza, a candidate in municipal elections who went missing in October 2020. In particular, the prosecution alleges that Mr. Vargas conspired with his law partner to arrange for the purchase a profitable private organization owned by Mr. de Souza, and then participated in a scheme to have Mr. de Souza murdered to allegedly further remove him control of the organization. Mr. Vargas was arrested on January 1, 2021 and detained. After a habeas corpus petition, he was placed under house arrest on January 25.

Mr. Vargas is a prominent human rights defender who has continued his advocacy on behalf of the victims of the Pau D'Arco massacre; almost four years after the massacre, the police officers who were arrested for their potential involvement have still not been brought to trial. However, in January 2021, a few weeks after Vargas' arrest, a key witness and survivor of the massacre was murdered, raising concerns that the proceedings against Mr. Vargas may be part of an attempt to thwart justice in that case.

The Clooney Foundation for Justice will be monitoring this trial in partnership with the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI), Columbia Global Centers in Rio and the Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute. **CFJ and IBAHRI call on the Brazilian authorities to ensure that any prosecution "is well-founded upon evidence reasonably believed to be reliable and admissible" and is not an effort to suppress Mr. Vargas's human rights work. CFJ and IBAHRI further stresses the need for trial to respect Mr. Vargas's fair-trial rights.**



The Clooney Foundation for Justice's [TrialWatch](#) initiative monitors and grades the fairness of trials of vulnerable people around the world, including journalists, women and girls, religious minorities, LGBTQ persons and human rights defenders. Using this data, TrialWatch advocates for victims and is developing a Global Justice Ranking measuring national courts' compliance with international human rights standards.



The [International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute](#) (IBAHRI), an autonomous and financially independent entity, works to promote, protect and enforce human rights under a just rule of law, and to preserve the independence of the judiciary and the legal profession worldwide.

The [International Bar Association](#) (IBA), the global voice of the legal profession, is the foremost organisation for international legal practitioners, bar associations and law societies. Established in 1947, shortly after the creation of the [United Nations](#), it was born out of the conviction that an organisation made up of the world's bar associations could contribute to global stability and peace through the administration of justice.



The [Human Rights Institute](#) at Columbia Law School advances international human rights through education, advocacy, fact-finding, research, scholarship, and critical reflection. We work in partnership with advocates, communities, and organizations pushing for social change to develop and strengthen the human rights legal framework and mechanisms, promote justice and accountability for human rights violations, and build and amplify collective power.

[Columbia Global Centers | Rio de Janeiro](#) is a hub for Columbia programs and initiatives relevant to Brazil. The Center works in collaboration with local universities, non-governmental organizations, and public institutions to design cross-cutting, innovative programs that aim to improve the understanding of global challenges through a transdisciplinary, transcultural and applied perspective. Ongoing events, lectures, and seminars hosted by the Center build a lively and engaged community of local and international alumni, students, and faculty.