

## Spying on justice

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VIEWED from any angle, the revelation that Abin, Brazil's intelligence agency, recorded a conversation between Gilmar Mendes, president of the Supreme Court, and Demóstenes Torres, a senator, is ugly. Either someone told the agency to bug the highest judge in the land, or the senator's phone was bugged—or an agent was freelancing. Any of these scenarios would be bad enough. But according to the source who handed the transcript to *Veja* magazine, the agency has also bugged the offices of the president and his chief of staff, as well as numerous congressmen.

In response to the news, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on September 1st ordered an inquiry and temporarily suspended Paulo Lacerda, the country's chief spook, and senior officials in his agency. Mr Lacerda denies that his men bugged Mr Mendes. He has Lula's backing, for the moment. In the meantime, all three branches of government—legislative, executive and judicial—are wondering whether they really were spied on, by whom and for what purpose.

The topic of the conversation between the two men, which took place on July 15th and lasted just a few minutes, was not top secret: Mr Torres called Mr Mendes to discuss an inquiry into paedophilia. That a legislator might call up a senior judge for a chat seems odd, as does the conversation's tone, which was all first names and laughter. Mr Torres even signed off with an *abraço* (a hug).

Eavesdropping incidents are not new. A decade ago a presidential conversation was caught when the office of the national development bank was bugged while the Telebrás phone company was being privatised, presumably so that a bidder could gain an advantage over rivals. Other incidents have occurred since, suggesting that Abin agents and phone-company employees can all too easily be bribed. The result, according to one political consultant, is that "the telephone in Brazil has become like Google: once you say hello, information is there for everyone to see and hear."