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Brazil: Government must work with communities to tackle security crisis

Amnesty International today called on the Brazilian federal and state authorities to work with local communities, and not against them, to tackle the country's public security crisis.

The call comes after months of violent police operations in the Complexo do Alemão and Vila da Penha resulting in dozens of people killed and thousands more facing the closure of schools and health centres as well as cuts in power and water supplies.

"Rio de Janeiro's new government is sacrificing the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people through the use of sporadic policing operations which are discriminatory, violent and ineffective," said Tim Cahill, Amnesty International's Brazil researcher.

"Far from providing the security the communities desperately long for, the intermittent incursions into the Complexo do Alemão and Vila da Penha have placed all lives at risk and wreaked social and economic damage that could take years to overcome," said Tim Cahill.

In May 2007, the State Secretary of public security, José Mariano Beltrame, told Amnesty International that security operations in Rio de Janeiro's favelas were supported by the communities as they guaranteed free passage within their neighbourhood. He conceded that such operations would have some negative impacts, but stressed that "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs."

"It is time Rio de Janeiro and its leaders heard the voices of those they claim to defend. They are not 'eggs' but people with names and addresses. Unfortunately for them, their address appears to exclude them from the kind of protection offered to those in wealthy neighbourhoods, such as Leblon and Ipanema," said Tim Cahill.

Amnesty International is also concerned that sections of the media and certain state and federal authorities have sought to undermine and discredit community residents and human rights activists who have challenged the actions of some police officers.

"It is irresponsible to suggest that those who denounce possible incidents of extra-judicial executions, torture, intimidation and theft during these operations are calling for policing with 'rose petals and talcum power', or in the pay of the drug factions" said Tim Cahill.

"Discrediting or stifling these complaints will at best reinforce the belief that the safety and wellbeing of residents is of secondary importance during these operations, and at worst send the message that illegal actions carried out in the context of those operations are permitted."

“Genuine security can only be achieved by working with the communities to protect all their rights, combining a permanent and respectful police presence with targeted social investment.”

Background Information

When Rio de Janeiro’s new government took office in January 2007, they promised a fresh approach to city’s longstanding public security problems, replacing violence and intimidation with a long-term strategy to reintegrate Rio’s excluded communities. Instead, the first six months have been the most violent in Rio’s bloody history, with record numbers of police killings and police deaths.

The two month police operation in the agglomeration of favelas that make up the Complexo do Alemão and Vila da Penha, in the north of the city has been symptomatic of this. These communities reportedly house the leaders of one of the city’s main drug factions, dominating and terrorizing the lives of residents for years. Yet when Amnesty International visited the Complexo do Alemão in May no police officers were visible.

Amnesty International visited the community of Grota and also spoke to residents and community leaders from both the Complexo do Alemão and Vila da Penha. Everyone stressed that they wanted to be rid of the control of the drug traffickers and wanted a permanent and effective police presence. But they also reported cases of deaths or injuries by stray bullets, verbal and physical abuse by police officers, destruction of property, cutting of electricity and water, and the closure of schools, health centres and small businesses.

Sixty days after launching these operations the death toll stands at 44 dead and over 80 injured, including police officers and several bystanders hit by stray bullets.

On 27 June police launched a so-called “mega-operation” with 1,350 state and federal police officers. Nineteen people were killed during the operation. Members of the state human rights commission have alleged that several of these killings occurred in situations suggesting extra-judicial executions. Amnesty International is concerned by attempts to dismiss these allegations and urges the authorities to break the longstanding tradition of cover-up and impunity which has characterised similar cases in the past. Policing based on illegality puts both civilians and police at greater risk.

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