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## **OAS Commission Criticizes Brazilian Police for Human Rights Abuses**

*by LADB Staff*

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The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, run by the Organization of American States (OAS), has criticized the Brazilian government regarding the country's human rights record, specifically abuses by local and national police forces. Government officials, however, point to several recent cases that they say indicate a move away from traditional impunity for police involved in rights violations. I

In a report published Dec. 8, the commission said the police operate death squads and regularly cover up abuses. It also said the Brazilian government has not done enough to ensure that human rights are respected and mentioned specifically the increasing number of extrajudicial killings carried out by the police. The report said that Brazilian police forces are in need of widespread reform to halt the repeated instances of violence and other abuses.

In what it called an "alarming phenomenon," the commission said the number of deaths in Rio de Janeiro attributed to military police averaged 20 per month in 1997. It said one battalion that covers favelas, or shantytowns, was responsible for a third of the deaths. The commission also said the number of deaths in civilian confrontations with the military police was triple the number of injuries, a reversal of normal patterns. "This is evidence of the use of excessive force and even shows a pattern of extrajudicial executions by the Rio de Janeiro police," the report said.

The report pointed out instances in which officers guilty of victimizing suspects have been rewarded. It cited one case in which a corporal was decorated and elected "officer of the year" even though he had been accused in connection with 49 assassinations. The colonel who presented the medal to the corporal had been accused of 44 murders in his 24 years on the force. More police being tried in civilian courts The Brazilian Foreign Ministry called the report "a valid contribution" in the struggle to protect human rights and said the government had co-operated fully with the commission.

The Foreign Ministry also said the report recognized the government's "sincere political will" to give human rights priority in its political agenda. In several recent cases, police have been held accountable for human rights violations. In one notorious case, 55 police officers, accused of massacring nearly two dozen people in Rio de Janeiro's Vigario Geral favela four years ago, will face trial in civilian court (see NotiSur, 09/03/93 and 10/01/93). The charges against the 55 officers stem from their alleged involvement in incidents that took place on the night of Aug. 30, 1993, when about 20 hooded people dressed in black and armed with automatic weapons and shotguns opened fire on Vigario Geral's residents. The massacre, in which 21 people were killed and four wounded, took place only hours after four military police officers had been killed in an ambush by alleged drug traffickers in the favela.

To date, two of the 55 have been tried and found guilty. On Nov. 28, Arlindo Maginario Filho, who pleaded innocent to charges of murder and attempted murder, was sentenced to 441 years and four months in jail, although defense attorneys say they will appeal the sentence. In August, Paulo Roberto Alvarenga was sentenced to 449 years and eight months in jail for his part in the killings.

Trials against 14 other police officers in the case were originally scheduled to begin Oct. 15, but the presiding judge postponed those hearings. Those trials are now scheduled for the next two months. Despite the lengthy sentences meted out in the two trials completed so far, under Brazilian law no prisoner may serve more than 30 years, regardless of sentence. In another widely publicized case, in mid-November, a judge found that 153 military police involved in a 1996 massacre of 19 campesinos will have to stand trial.

The multiple homicides, known as the "massacre of Eldorado dos Carajas," took place on April 17, 1996, when the military police in the state of Para were ordered to repress a protest organized by members of the Movimento Sem Terra (MST), an organization dedicated to fighting for the rights of landless campesinos (see NotiSur, 04/26/96, 08/02/96, 11/21/97). Brazilian journalist Mariza Romao, a key witness in the Eldorado case, said on Dec. 3 that she had been afraid for her life.

A reporter for national Globo television, Romao was filming in April 1996 when Brazilian military police opened fire on a group of campesinos blocking a road as part of a protest demanding land reform. Romao's testimony was crucial in the judge's decision that the police officers, who allegedly acted on the orders of local land barons, would have to stand trial for murder. The trial is tentatively scheduled to begin in February.

Romao began receiving death threats the day the indictments were issued. When the threats continued and became more menacing, Romao left her home in the state of Para and went to Brasilia. Americo Cesar Antunes, president of the national press association, said her case was not unique. Twenty-four journalists have been threatened and three have been killed in Brazil this year, Antunes said. [Sources: Agence France- Presse, Associated Press, 11/28/97; Reuter, 11/26/97, 12/03/97; BBC News, 12/08/97; The Miami Herald, 12/09/97; Financial Times (England), 12/11/97]

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