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Brazilian Publication Documents Attrocities During Military Dictatorship

by LADB Staff
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The government of Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva formally presented a publication of more than 500 pages cataloging the atrocities and abuses committed during Brazil's 1964-1985 military dictatorship. The government published the book, Direito a Memoria e a Verdade (The Right to Memory and to Truth), on the anniversary of Brazil's amnesty law passed in 1979. It accuses officials of rape, torture, executing prisoners, and concealing victims' bodies.

President Lula said that his government would also open still-unreleased archives from the days of the dictatorship to the public, denying that the military would resist such a move.

First publication of its kind
It was the first time Brazil has published an official document detailing atrocities said to have been committed during the military dictatorship. The book was launched at a ceremony attended by Lula, who was briefly imprisoned under the dictatorship.

After 11 years of work, the official publication is meant to record what the special commission set up to investigate political deaths and disappearances the Comissao Especial de Mortos e Desaparecidos Politicos considers to be the historical truth about the dark period in Brazil's recent history.

More than 400 people are believed to have been killed under the military rule, while more than 160 others are thought to have disappeared, although this was far fewer than in neighboring countries such as Chile and Argentina. The book analyzed 479 cases of alleged abuse, among them political murder, sexual torture, and forced disappearances. Federal agents are also alleged to have decapitated people.

The book notes that opponents of the regime resorted to bank robberies, kidnapping foreign diplomats, and attacks on military bases, which it says produced countless victims. Paulo Vannuchi, Brazil's special secretary for human rights, speaking at the launch of the book, told the BBC he would not use the word "crime" to describe the deaths of agents working for the dictatorship a view that is likely to cause anger in military circles.

No military representatives were present at the Aug. 29 ceremony. Vannuchi was a member of a militant group that fought against the regime and was imprisoned for five years, during which he was tortured. In 1995, Brazil passed a law acknowledging the government was responsible for deaths under the dictatorship and compensation was paid to more than 300 families.
However, the bodies of some of those who disappeared have not been recovered and the book calls on the government to allow evidence to be taken from members of the police and military who might be able to locate those missing remains.

Victims of the dictatorship say because of this the official publication only represents modest progress, while the authors say they hope it will advance the sacred right of families to bury their loved ones.

Since its formation, the commission has looked at 339 cases of abuse and authorized indemnifications that have ranged from 100,000 reais to 152,500 reais (between US$54,000 and US $83,000). An amnesty law, passed as the dictatorship was drawing to a close, pardoned all those said to have been involved in crimes committed under the regime, as well as those who fought against it. Folha de Sao Paulo columnist Eliane Cantanhede reported that military officials felt the publication provided no new information about the dictatorship years and found Lula's support for the book "incomprehensible."

**Lula promises government will open records**

At the Aug. 29 ceremony, Lula indicated that the government sought to open archives from the dictatorship period. He said Dilma Rousseff, Lula's chief of staff, would be in charge of that job and that the commission analyzing abuses from the period should be expanded. "We want to contribute and work so that Brazilian society might close the page on this history, turn the page once and for all so that everyone might construct a future with much more solidarity," said Lula.

The Brazilian president denied that there would be resistance from the armed forces, saying, "I think there is willingness among the military and the police [to open records]. What we are going to do is what we have the conditions to do."

"The commission will be broadened, we are going to see what the difficulties are, prepare new members, and continue the debate," said Lula. "It is a debate that has resentments, that has pain and tears, but it needs to be done by society and we are going to do it." Vannuchi echoed the sentiment, saying, "Silence and omission do not permit the right, above all, of 180 families to bury their dead. The information needs to be given out."

The issue of opening secret archives has led to conflict within Lula's government in years past. In November 2004, defense minister Jose Viegas resigned his post. The resignation followed a statement from the Army that defended the conduct of the military government. The disagreement erupted on Oct. 17, 2004, when a newspaper published photographs of a naked man in a prison cell, said to be that of a journalist who died in military custody in 1975.

In response, the Brazilian Army put out a statement defending the military government's actions, which it suggested constituted "a legitimate answer to the violence of those who refused dialogue." The statement was not cleared with politicians, and a furious Viegas was not pacified by a later statement from an Army commander regretting the deaths of political prisoners.
In his resignation letter, Viegas said the Army statement, "in totally inadequate language, tried to justify deplorable episodes from the past." The statement "represents the persistence of an authoritarian thinking, connected to an old and anachronistic doctrine of national security, incompatible with democracy and Brazil in the 21st century," Viegas said, in a copy of the letter published by news service Folha Online.

Viegas had overseen the dispatch of Brazilian troops as part of a peacekeeping mission to Haiti and a new law allowing suspected drug-smuggling aircraft to be shot down over the Amazon (see NotiCen, 2004-04-22, 2004-06-03 and 2004-07-29). He was criticized for claiming that records from the military government era had been destroyed, especially after the photo of the naked prisoner emerged.

The next year, the government opened up secret files dating from the military dictatorship following a long campaign by human rights organizations and family members of those killed or disappeared.

One group complained, however, that some files containing crucial information about victims were still held back. The Brazilian human rights group Tortura Nunca Mais (Torture Never Again) said too little had been declassified and too late. The group believed there were many more files still secret, which had direct information about those killed or disappeared and which could implicate officials still in office. It accused the government of continuing to cover up the past.

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