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U.N. Report Condemns Frequent Killings by Brazilian Police in 'War on Crime'

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A UN report completed on June 1 condemned police impunity in extrajudicial killings in Brazil, particularly in the conflict-ridden favelas, or shantytowns, of the city and state of Rio de Janeiro. The report came out the same week as journalists living undercover in a favela in Rio were allegedly kidnapped and tortured by a paramilitary militia, which the journalists said included police.

UN says police violence backfires, fails to reduce crime

UN special envoy Philip Alston released his completed report on June 1, saying the federal and state governments' security strategy that sought to reduce urban violence was failing and was based "in extradjudicial assassinations permitted by the state."

In a presentation to the UN Human Rights Council, Alston said the policy had "failed miserably under any criteria," while police killings had increased and control of crime had worsened. Alston completed a mission in Brazil in November (see NotiSur, 2008-01-18) and had delivered his report on his investigation to Brazilian authorities.

The investigation centered on occurrences in Rio de Janeiro, where police committed 18% of the killings recorded in 2007, with an average of three victims per day, a 25% increase over the year before. Clashes with police killed a record 1,260 civilians in Rio de Janeiro state last year nearly the same as the number of all people murdered in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, where a combined 1,328 homicides occurred in 2007.

The tally omitted statistics from about one-third of precincts, which did not have computers. Alston questions whether these killings have accomplished the objective of improving security and concludes that just the opposite is occurring. The interdiction of drugs has gone down 5.7%, the confiscation of arms has gone down 16.9%, and arrests have gone down 13.2%, according to Alston's statements.

Alston says that police officials described almost all of the killings as "acts of resistance, [which] gives the police a blank check to kill and take advantage of what in practice is impunity." Most police killings have occurred during "acts of resistance," police jargon for armed confrontations with civilians, according to a January report by the Instituto de Segurança Publica (ISP), a security research and analysis group of the state government of Rio de Janeiro. Alston added that the situation in Rio de Janeiro is more insecure and that innocent bystanders end up wounded or killed, a scenario that results in law-enforcement groups failing to regain control of the favelas from gangs.

'Policing by opinion poll' exacerbates violence

Despite the increasing violence, the domestic political situation works to reinforce this condition. Alston says thousands of killings by Brazil's police are going largely unpunished because of
public approval for a perceived crackdown on crime. Officials have often turned a blind eye to the extrajudicial executions because of "policing by opinion poll," Alston wrote in his preliminary report. He said the deaths were "politically driven" because they are "popular among those who want rapid results and shows of force." Rio de Janeiro state police did not respond to requests for comment on June 1.

On June 2, however, Rio state security chief Jose Mariano Beltrame called the Alston report "myopic" and "dislocated from the reality of Rio." Beltrame refuted the assertion that police activity was counterproductive, saying, "If the police do not have a strategy, how could we have captured the quantity and quality of drugs that the civil and military police have done in such a short period of time? This is historic in the city of Rio de Janeiro." He added, "I cannot accept that a person leaves from Australia, comes here for four days, and makes a report." Many of the deaths are tied to a new, more aggressive police approach against drug traffickers who control most of Rio's 600-plus shantytowns, police have said.

Rio de Janeiro state officials have praised many of the actions. Alston's report sharply criticized those tactics, which include large-scale police invasions into the favelas that have caused scores of civilian deaths. A June 2007 operation that killed 19 civilians was "declared a model for future action," he said. On January 30, six people were killed in a large police operation; on April 3, 11 were killed; and on April 15, 14 were killed. "These recent events highlight the continuing and urgent need for reforms to policing approaches and the criminal-justice system," Alston wrote.

Rio de Janeiro state Gov. Sergio Cabral has defended the tactics, accusing the media of sympathizing more with criminals than with their victims. But Alston's report said Rio police become criminals at times. They "all too often engage in excessive and counterproductive violence while on duty, and participate in what amounts to organized crime when off duty," he wrote.

Alston called for a total overhaul of policing strategies in both Rio de Janeiro state and city police. Police salaries should be increased as poor pay encourages corruption, and a robust witness-protection program should be created to protect those who testify against police, he said. Journalists abducted, tortured by police-paramilitary group As if to affirm Alston's allegations about police criminality,

Brazilian and international press outlets carried the story of two journalists who said they were taken captive for almost eight hours and tortured by a paramilitary group that allegedly included police. The story of the two journalists came out on June 2, the day after Alston discussed his preliminary report and the day he was set to present it formally to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Geneva.

The O Dia newspaper said a reporter and photographer for the paper were abducted with their driver May 14 and held for nearly eight hours in the western Rio de Janeiro favela of Batan where they had been working undercover. They said they were taken to a "private prison" and beaten, given electric shocks, and had plastic bags placed over their heads. The journalists suffered no lasting injuries and were released with orders not to identify their captors, O Dia reported. Rio state
security chief Beltrame said active-duty police had been linked to paramilitaries who control the Batan slum where the journalists said they were tortured.

On June 2 he said it was possible police were part of the group that tortured the journalists. Reporters Without Borders (RWB), meanwhile, called for an immediate federal inquiry into the case. In an open letter to Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and other officials, RWB said it was stunned to think police could carry out such a crime, despite what it said were other recent attacks on the media by police in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. "These cases of abuse of authority require the appointment of a federal commission to investigate and suppress these militias in coordination with the state authorities," wrote RWB secretary-general Robert Menard.

Brazil's top justice official also expressed outrage at the abductions. Justice Minister Romeu Tuma Junior said federal authorities stand ready to help in any way needed in the investigations, adding that the case was "repugnant" and "incompatible with a democratic state." "We're going to rigorously punish [the perpetrators], because we cannot conceive that a public figure, exercising a function as important as a police officer, could be this type of criminal," Tuma Junior said.

Militias have moved into poor Rio de Janeiro neighborhoods in the past year, charging residents US $7 to US$14 a month for protection against drug gangs. Officials say militias made up of active and former police, firefighters, private security, and off-duty prison guards now control about 15% of the city's 600 slums.

The O Dia journalists, whom the paper declined to identify, were investigating the activities of the Batan militia, a group generally composed of active or retired soldiers, police, or firefighters who fight for power with drug traffickers in the slums.

The journalists had moved into the favela two weeks before they were allegedly kidnapped and tortured. Along with press-freedom groups and the Justice Ministry, the lawyers' group Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil (OAB) condemned the action. OAB president Cezar Britto called the event an "intolerable scandal," adding that "residents of the Rio slums are today the hostages of bandits, who fight over power, some in the name of crime, and others in the name of fighting crime."

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