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Rio Protests Disappearance of Poor Favela Resident

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The disappearance of Amarildo de Souza, a 43-year-old construction worker, two months ago exemplifies the ongoing political repression Brazilians face daily.

Authorities claimed they released De Souza immediately after police mistakenly picked him up as a suspected drug dealer. De Souza, however, never reached work or returned home. After a Unidade de Policia Pacificadora (UPP) patrol detained him as he left his home in the Rio de Janeiro favela of Rocinha on July 14, he has not been heard from or seen again.

Major media did not report on De Souza’s "disappearance" until two weeks later when thousands took to the streets in protest. On Aug. 1, O Globo, a Rio de Janeiro daily, and O Estado of São Paulo reported on Movimento Rio de Paz’s protest calling for the release of De Souza, a member of a neighborhood committee and father of six children. The demonstration passed through Copacabana beach, famed as a place of beautiful sunsets, lovers’ encounters, and weekend beach-soccer games.

When Pope Francis spoke to 3 million faithful at the same beach on July 24 (NotiSur, May 3, 2013), less than a week before the protest, he denounced frequent violence and disappearances occurring in favelas (NotiSur, Jan. 18, 2008, and June 13, 2008), neighborhoods clinging to the hillsides surrounding the city that was Brazil’s capital until 1960.

Number of disappeared tops 34,000
In the last seven years—between January 2007 and May 2013—34,681 people have disappeared in Rio de Janeiro, according to the Movimento Rio de Paz, a humanitarian organization that cited official statistics from the Instituto de Segurança Pública (ISP). The organization says that 80% of the "disappeared" are from the favelas.

The figure is shocking when compared with the 30,000 killed or disappeared under Argentina’s military dictatorship that institutionalized political disappearances between 1976 and 1983 because Rio is a city—obviously much smaller and less populated today than the neighboring country was in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Rio’s 16 million inhabitants live in a 2,000 sq km area while 2.7 million sq km Argentina had a population of 25 million.

On Aug. 11, Brazilian Father's Day, a few hundred people gathered to call attention to De Souza’s fate. His wife and children participated in the protest, the third of a series in which people carried signs asking, "Who killed Amarildo?" The same day Amnesty International (AI) called for an end of "the practice of suspending human rights in slums and underprivileged areas." Local community organizations Justicia Global and Red de Comunidades announced plans to join AI in taking the disappearance issue—specifically the De Souza case—to the UN humanitarian agencies based in Geneva, Switzerland.

Theologian Antonio Carlos Costa, founder and coordinator of the Movimento Rio de Paz, which works with favela communities, said there’s more than one explanation for the practice of disappearances, a term used in international human rights law to define the secret abduction
or imprisonment by a government (or by a third party with the support of a state or political organization) in which no one acknowledges the person’s whereabouts. He cites three causes: first, the battle between favela-based criminal groups; second, illegal gangs setting up "traffic tribunals" to judge, disappear, or assassinate their own members; and third, police persecution of minor delinquents such as crack users, petty robbers, or simply suspects as was the case with De Souza.

The Argentine daily Tiempo on Aug. 11 quoted Costa as saying that disappearance has become a terrible police practice, reminiscent of Nazism, as well as a practice used by drug dealers. In some cases, he said, victims are incinerated, making their remains unidentifiable. Bodies that are not burned end up in clandestine cemeteries, thrown to the dogs, or dissolved with acid.

Costa said that 80% of the violent killings and disappearances in the state of Rio de Janeiro occur in favelas and other marginalized areas, such as the Baixada Fluminense, a highly populated area of the city with a high index of extreme poverty. Meanwhile, the rich part of the city operates under a "European security standard."

Julio Waiselfisz, a sociologist who heads the Área de Estudos sobre Violência, an affiliate of the Faculdade Latino-Americana de Ciências Sociais (FLACSO) in Rio, said, according to a July 31 post on the Brazilian Web site Operamundi, that factors keeping the violence alive can be found in "the structural corruption of state institutions." Official figures "shouldn’t surprise us," he said, because there’s a degree of violence within security forces that not only doesn’t protect the poorest people but, on the contrary, also takes advantage of them. "There are death squads within the state apparatus that take the law into their own hands, and the apparatus itself makes sure the violence is carried out."

Favela residents, human rights workers, and scholars alike confirm the frightening picture of favela violence Waiselfisz described. He said that, after winning the battle against drug traffickers in the favelas, illegal groups (both active and ex-police) took control of the territory, creating a mafia and a black market for armed protection, Internet, telephone, and electrical services, as well as alternative transportation. Along with illegally offering the pirated services in the favelas, the mafiosos maintain control of both crime and security. People who don’t pay for protection or other services don’t just lack protection. They are threatened with assassination or "disappearance."

Not surprisingly, police do not investigate the disappearances occurring in the favelas as they could be investigating themselves, said Waiselfisz.

On Aug. 4, Minister of Human Rights Maria do Rosário Nunes told the Spanish daily El País the same thing that Waiselfisz said. She noted that ironically only two of the 84 surveillance cameras watching Rocinha’s 70,000 residents were not working on the day of De Souza’s disappearance—but they were the two focused on the entrance of the UPP station. Also not working that day, she said, were the GPS units on police vehicles that otherwise could have helped follow the arrested man.

The campaign to find De Souza coincided recently with a virulent wave of protests against the rising cost of public transportation (NotiSur, Aug. 23, 2013). Demonstrators’ slogans criticized the limited, but auspicious, favela pacification process.

"The pacification process is the best thing that has happened to the favelas in the history of Rio de Janeiro's public security," according to the Movimento Rio de Paz. Costa explained that the process has broken armed territorial domination. "We now depend on a police force that has serious
problems: it is corrupt, the agents are poorly chosen, poorly prepared and trained for their job. But we also have two police forces, one in the streets and the other in the favelas, that confront each other continually and don’t cooperate with each other. To some degree, one can say that the militias are worse than the drug traffickers because they have colluded with the government, with legislators, with retired police chiefs and active police and are more structured and powerful than the death squads of the 1970s who, by using extortion, torture, and murder, ensure safety in the neighborhoods under their control.

Costa said he believes in the spirit of people of the favelas that he and his organization work with on a daily basis. "However, beyond the problem of a corrupt police, I believe the basic issue is one of social inequality because Brazil, the world’s sixth-largest economic power, is one of the most inequitable countries on the planet and the social inequality in a consumer society like ours generates violence," he said. "The problem will only be solved with dignified work, education, and more equitable wealth distribution because most poor people don’t belong to organized crime. On the contrary, they work and they work hard."

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