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Brazil: Espírito Santo -- Lives on the line, no more empty promises

The recent wave of intimidation against human rights defenders in the state of Espírito Santo -- which has seen over fifty people receive death threats over the last week -- is yet another stark reminder of the urgent need for a thorough investigation of long-standing human rights abuse, organised crime and corruption, and for those responsible to be finally brought to justice, Amnesty International said today.

"This will be the most effective way for the authorities to ensure the protection of the human rights community and put an end to the killings in the state," the organization added.

The statement came on the day in which the Brazilian human rights organization Global Justice is releasing a new report on the critical situation for human rights defenders in Espírito Santo.

Amnesty International urged the authorities to give the new task force, set up by the federal government to investigate organised crime in the state, the full and sustained political and financial support it needs to effectively fulfil its role.

"Short of this, the task force will become another empty promise on the president's human rights record," the organization warned.

Amnesty International made a series of specific recommendations to ensure the effectiveness of the task force. These include:

- ensuring that the task force is clearly mandated to investigate the long history of unpunished human rights crimes in the state, and bring to justice those responsible. This must include federal-level investigations of human rights crimes, as recently allowed by law 10,440 of May this year;

- ensuring that all investigations are impartial and transparent, and that members of the state judiciary are provided with conditions to guarantee their security so as to allow all criminal investigations to proceed swiftly through the judicial process;

- Clearly establishing the criteria that will affect any decisions to extend the period of the task force's activities beyond the initial 90 days, and who will have the power to make such decisions.

"Most importantly the federal government must not elude its responsibility to all human rights defenders in the state of Espírito Santo, who are at particular risk now, due to their long-standing work in the fight against organized crime, violence, human rights abuses, corruption and impunity," Amnesty International said.

The organization recently received a request for a meeting from the Governor of the state of Espírito Santo, José Ignácio Ferreira. Amnesty International welcomes any information the Governor may wish to offer at the meeting and, in anticipation of the meeting, has requested specific details on numerous issues, including: numbers of police killings; status of any investigations into police killings; and details of investigations into specific killings including those of Father Gabriel Maire, Jean Alvez da Cunha and Marcelo Denadai.

Until this information is provided the organization will maintain its position on the human rights crisis that exists in the state, based on research visits to Espírito Santo, most recently in April 2002, and information provided by a wide range of sources including: the Ministry of Justice's Human Rights Council (CDDPH); the report into drug trafficking by the Federal Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry; members of the state government, the local human rights community, the state public prosecutor's office, and the bar association; and former and active police officers.

Amnesty International intends to send another delegation to the state of Espírito Santo later this year to follow up on the progress of the federal government's task force as well as update research done in its earlier visit.

"We will go back to Espírito Santo to monitor what effective measures have been taken to protect those engaged in the defence of human rights and the fight against violence and corruption, and to put an end to the widespread impunity that so far has sheltered those responsible for human rights violations in the state," Amnesty International said.

Background

Earlier this month, the Brazilian Ministry of Justice's Human Rights Council recommended federal intervention in the state of Espírito Santo due to the extremely serious levels of human rights violations, organized crime and impunity in the state. After the Federal Attorney General failed to support these recommendations, the Ministry of Justice announced the setting-up of a federal task force, mandated to investigate organised crime in the state over a 90-day period. The task force will be entirely composed of federal investigators.

Amnesty International notes that in December 2001 the Ministry of Justice announced that a federal task force would be sent to investigate violence, organised crime, and slave labour in the south of Pará state for a period of 6 months. To this day no such task force has been set up.

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