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Brazil: This is not justice -- Corumbiara tragedy continues

Brazil's state justice system has proved once again that it is incapable of investigating and prosecuting effectively those responsible for gross human rights abuses, Amnesty International said today.

This week saw the end of the trial into the killing of 10 land activist and two military police officers in Corumbiara, Rondonia state, in August 1995 in the course of a police eviction operation. All but three of the twelve military police on trial were acquitted for lack of evidence. Others police personnel, civilian gunmen and a local landowner reportedly implicated in the crimes were never even brought to trial.

By contrast during the same trial, two land activists were convicted of the murder of two military police officers, despite the apparent lack of any evidence proving their individual criminal responsibility.

"Police sought to scupper investigations into the massacre from the start," Amnesty International said, "destroying crime scene evidence and extrajudicially executed potential witnesses."

The various authorities assigned to investigate the massacre have either been complicit in this cover up or have been undermined by lack of resources, manpower and political will.

"Once again justice has not been served by a judicial system that is apparently incapable or unwilling to establish the individual criminal responsibility of those who are behind these horrendous crimes," Amnesty International said.

"Relatives of all the victims will continue to be denied justice, until the truth about the massacre is brought to light in a court of law" the organization added.

Amnesty International is urging the federal authorities to intervene to ensure that Brazil's state judicial systems are capable of conducting independent and effective investigations, which should lead to the individual prosecution of those responsible for human rights violations in accordance with international standards for fair trials.

"The tragic list of massacres in Brazil's recent history -- in which all but a tiny handful of the perpetrators have evaded justice -- is daily proof that the Brazilian authorities' commitment to end impunity and ensure human rights protection remain little more than empty rhetoric," the organization said.

"As the re-trial of the military police accused of the notorious Eldorado do Carajás massacre of land activists in April 1996 approaches, the opportunity must not be lost to ensure that those responsible are effectively prosecuted."

Background

On 8 August 1999 up to 200 Military Police, with the support civilian gunmen, carried out judicial order to evict 2000 land activists from Santa Elina estate in the municipality Corumbiara, Rondônia. The police were accused of firing indiscriminately at the land activists, some of whom reportedly also shot at the police. The operation resulted in the death of at least 10 land activists, though there have been claims that more died, and two military police. Many other land activists were reportedly tortured during and after the operation. Over 700 arrests were made. A number the land activist killed were reportedly

extrajudicially executed after the police had occupied the squatter camp. One of the detained, Sérgio Rodriguez Gomes, was murdered by civilians, after the police handed him over to gunmen in military barracks some days after the eviction operation. (For more information, please refer to Amnesty International's report "Corumbiara and Eldorado de Carajás: Rural Violence, Police Brutality and Impunity")

The combined trial of 15 Military Police officials and two land activist leaders started on 14 August 2000 and ended with the acquittal of the senior officer in charge of operation on 6 September 2000.

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