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Refoming São Paulo's prison system: tackle the cause not the symptom

Long term penal and judicial reform is urgently needed in São Paulo if the prison system is to overcome the crisis made evident by the recent prison rebellion which left at least 16 inmates dead, Amnesty International said today.

“Short term responses to this unprecedented prisoner revolt will not prevent further similiar incidents. Ill-considered and quick-fix solutions could aggravate the extreme crisis,” the organization added.

So far, the authorities have consistently failed to invest in a penal service capable of dealing with the strains of an ever growing prison population. Inhuman overcrowding, ill-treatment and inadequate staffing with ill-trained and underpaid guards have created a vacuum in many institutions, which is sometimes filled by corrupt officials and prisoners.

The Primerio Comando da Capital (PCC), Capital First Command, a prison criminal gang accused of causing the weekend rebellion, is itself a product of the failings of the system. Measures to tackle the situation must not be solely targeted at these criminal organizations, but must confront the long standing institutional neglect that has led to this crisis.

Amnesty International recognises the efforts of Dr Nagashi Furukawa, recently appointed State Secretary for Penal Administration, to improve São Paulo's penal system. However, state and federal level support is essential if comprehensive and effective reform is to be achieved.

“It is now time for all the relevant authorities to overhaul the whole the prison system in São Paulo, which could serve as a model for other Brazilian states,” Amnesty International urged.

The involvement of human rights defenders and politicians in negotiations played a crucial role in avoiding violent confrontation in the recent disturbances.

The continued role of these groups and individuals, including the Pastoral Carcerária, Catholic Prisons Ministry, will be essential to finding solutions both to the immediate and long-term crisis.

Background

The prison rebellion began in Carandiru prison on Sunday 18 February 2001 during visiting hours and led to coordinated protests by inmates in over 25 prisons in the state. As a result, thousands of visiting relatives were held hostage. The rebellion ended on 19 February after prolonged negotiations. At least 16 inmates were killed, the majority reportedly by other prisoners, during the disturbances.

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