

MEDIA ADVISORY

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BRAZIL: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR FORENSIC EXPERTS TO BE GRANTED INDEPENDENCE FROM POLICE

SÃO PAULO -- As part of a worldwide campaign to encourage the medical profession to defend human rights more actively, Amnesty International is launching today a report on the inconsistent role of doctors in Brazil in documenting torture, deaths in custody and unlawful killings by the police.

“Medical evidence is a crucial tool in exposing the truth about human rights violations which the Brazilian police authorities all too often try to cover up,” Amnesty International says. “International human rights standards call for independent investigators to ensure impartiality. The credibility of Brazil’s forensic service would be enhanced by separating it from the police.”

In its report, Amnesty International examines recent attempts by Brazilian Medical Councils to discipline medical personnel for their involvement in, or false certification of, human rights violations during military rule in the 1970s. It also examines institutional obstacles that currently prevent medical personnel from contributing more fully to the exposure of human rights abuses. All forensic services are subordinate to local state police secretariats, and in the case of torture, permission for a medical examination must be sought from the police.

Amnesty International welcomes recent federal legislation stipulating that detainees should be given medical examinations, as a deterrent against torture, and calls on the Brazilian authorities and medical institutions to ensure that such medical checks are put into operation in all Brazilian States. The organization calls for forensic services to be given independence from the police. Recent forensic controversies underline this need. They include:

- attempts to cast doubt on evidence pointing to military police responsibility for the massacre of 19 landless peasants in Eldorado do Carajas, Para State, in April 1996, despite full autopsies conducted at the time.
- the discovery that corpses of the 21 victims of the Vigário Geral shanty town massacre in Rio de Janeiro in September 1993 were buried without all the bullets being retrieved and matched with suspect military police weapons.
- the continued failure to conduct ballistic tests on bullets removed from 111 prisoners extrajudicially executed by military police after the Casa de Detenção riot in October 1992.

Such controversies all point, in Amnesty International’s view, to the urgent need to improve standards and ensure effective independence of forensic services from the security forces in Brazil. ENDS\

Note for Editors:

Brazil: Human Rights Violations and the Health Professions will be launched in the Auditorium of the São Paulo Branch of the Brazilian Bar Association, Praça da Sé 385, São Paulo, at 10:30 am, Brazilian time, on Friday 11 October.

Presenting the report will be:

- Professor Mariano Castex, Forensic Pathologist and Psychiatrist, member of the Argentine Academy of Sciences.
- Professor Duarte Nuno Vieira, Director, Institute of Legal Medicine, Coimbra University, Portugal.
- Alison Sutton, Researcher on Brazil, Amnesty International, International Secretariat.

For more information please contact:

Amnesty International Porto Alegre: + 55 51 217 3220

Amnesty International São Paulo: + 55 11 542 9819

Amnesty International London: Press Office + 44 171 413 5808