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BRAZIL: AI CALLS FOR OVERHAUL OF POLICE SYSTEM IN WAKE OF MASSACRE

Amnesty International is calling on the Brazilian authorities to make a fundamental review of the operation of civil and military police forces, following the third massacre to be attributed to military police in 11 months.

Said Amnesty International: "Serious consideration must be given to radical changes to the entire structure of police forces in Brazil, because of persistent human rights violations by members of the military police, which each week take on greater and greater proportions." The forthcoming review of the Constitution may provide an opportunity for such a review of police forces in Brazil.

The organization's call follows the massacre of 21 people in the shanty town (favela) of Vigário Geral, in Rio de Janeiro, on 30 August in what the state Governor called "an inadmissible act of revenge" for the killing of four military police, allegedly by drugs traffickers based in the favela, on 28 August. According to reports some 30 hooded and heavily armed men assaulted the shanty town for two hours, killing seven men playing cards in a bar, eight members of a family of 13, and six other men in different locations of the favela.

Amnesty International has received reports of extrajudicial executions and other human rights violations by members of the military police in most states of the Brazilian Federation including Alagoas, Amazonas, Mato Grosso do Sul and Pernambuco. Three military policemen are currently in detention awaiting trial for the killing of eight youths near the Candelária church in central Rio de Janeiro on 23 July 1993. 120 military police officers and soldiers await trial for killing 111 prisoners, most of whom had surrendered, at the Casa de Detenção prison in São Paulo on 2 October 1992.

Amnesty International said in a letter addressed to President Itamar Franco that these crimes "indicate a disturbing pattern of gross human rights violations involving members of the military police which the civilian authorities appear unwilling or unable to prevent. This pattern raises serious questions about the legal status, chain of command, discipline and operational guidelines of the military police as well as the ability and willingness of the authorities at all levels to signal to all members of the security forces that human rights violations, including the killing of unarmed civilians, are criminal offences which will not be tolerated."

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