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Brazil: Violence in Rio de Janeiro condemned

Amnesty International today urged the Brazilian authorities to act proportionately and within the law in their response to the wave of criminal gang violence that has swept Rio de Janeiro over the last week.

A wave of criminal violence has seen attacks on police posts, intimidation of residents and the burning of almost 100 vehicles.

More than thirty people have died during military and civil police operations against gang members, including a 14-year-old student hit by a stray bullet in her home in the community of Vila Cruzeiro.

“This violence is totally unacceptable but the police response has put communities at risk.

The authorities must ensure that the security and well-being of the broader population comes first and foremost in any operation carried out in residential areas,” said Patrick Wilcken, Amnesty International’s Brazil researcher.

According to the Municipal Education Secretary, 17 schools and 12 creches have been closed in Rio this week, leaving more than 12,000 children without education. Thousands across the north zone of the city have been unable to go to work and large numbers of residents have been left without water or electricity.

“The current wave of criminal violence is symptomatic of wider failures throughout the criminal justice system,” said Patrick Wilcken.

“This week’s attacks are a wake up call for the incoming Federal and State administrations.”

Media reports suggest that the current wave of attacks was ordered by a gang leader incarcerated in a federal prison in Rôndonia, exposing weaknesses within the federal prison system.

Amnesty International fears that the current security operation being mounted around a group of communities known as the Complexo do Alemão will lead to further bloodshed. Residents are now confined to their homes, businesses have closed and gunfire is being reported.

In a similar 2007 “mega-operation” in Complexo do Alemão, 19 people were killed by police. Despite subsequent allegations from the state human rights commission of summary executions, the killings were never adequately investigated. The operation had no long-term positive impact on the security of the community, which has continued to be dominated by the Comando Vermelho drug faction.

Other than specialised Police Pacification Units (Unidade Polícia Pacificadora, UPP), which have significantly reduced violence in some dozen communities, policing in Rio de Janeiro continues to depend on repressive methods.

Rio police have killed over 500 people so far this year in so-called “acts of resistance”. Large swathes of

the city continue to be dominated by paramilitary police groups.

Amnesty International calls on president-elect Dilma Rousseff to stand by her promise to make public security a priority during her forthcoming term in office.

The organisation also urges the Rio authorities to abandon short term repressive approaches and focus on long-term, structural reform of the criminal justice system, and guaranteeing security with policing based on violence-reduction and respect for human rights.