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Killing of Brazilian judge exposes police corruption

The killing of a judge by gunmen near Rio de Janeiro highlights the city's profound problems with police corruption and organized crime, Amnesty International said today.

Judge Patrícia Acioli was in her car outside her home in Niterói, across the bay from Rio de Janeiro on the night of Thursday, 11 August, when hooded gunmen approached in several vehicles and shot her 21 times at close range, according to initial forensic reports.

An investigation is under way to determine who was behind the attack, but Acioli had received threats from police officers and criminal gangs, and her name had been on a list of 12 people, including other judges and prosecutors, marked for death by a local militia group run by former police officers. Because of previous threats, she had been placed under police protection for a time, but this was withdrawn in 2007.

“Patrícia Acioli's brutal killing exposes a deeply troubling situation where corruption and organized crime are controlling large areas of life in parts of Rio de Janeiro today,” said Patrick Wilcken, Brazil Researcher at Amnesty International.

“The killing of a judge who was simply carrying out her duty has dealt a blow to the rule of law and the judicial system in Brazil. The authorities must undertake a thorough and independent investigation to bring those responsible to justice.

“But they must do much more. The federal, state and municipal authorities must put in place coordinated measures to root out organized crime in the city, while providing adequate protection for those involved in the investigation and prosecution of corrupt police officers and criminal gangs.”

Acioli was known as an uncompromising judge who had long investigated cases of police involvement in death squads, militias and drug gangs operating in Rio de Janeiro's metropolitan region. Over the past decade she had sentenced around 60 police officers involved in death squads and militia groups – mafias that use violence and extortion to intimidate and exert control over communities.

In late 2008, Rio de Janeiro's state Parliament led an inquiry aimed at combating the militia groups.

Despite more than 500 arrests of militia members and high profile trials of corrupt police officers since then, little has been done to tackle the illegal economic activities that fuel these groups.

“The police, municipal and state authorities are turning a blind eye to the vast networks of militia-run transport, gas and telecommunication services which continue to operate with impunity across Rio,” said Patrick Wilcken.

“An important step in combating the power of organized crime in Rio de Janeiro should be the full implementation of the recommendations of the 2008 Parliamentary Inquiry into the militias, which

Patrícia Acioli herself supported. This includes clamping down on the black economy that sustains and entrenches police corruption and organized crime.”