

## **Brazil: Less than human -- Life in Belo Horizonte police stations**

*34 detainees crammed into cells built to hold 4 - windowless cells from which prisoners are allowed out only one hour every 15 days - 1000% overcrowding - suspected torturers acting with impunity for more than thirty years...*

Although the horrors described above sound as if they belong to a medieval work of fiction, they are the reality of the daily routine of terrible conditions, chronic overcrowding, torture and corruption suffered by prisoners and witnessed by Amnesty International in a recent visit to two police stations in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais state.

Against the backdrop of increasing public demands for a tougher stance against violent crime, and with recent polls showing mounting support for the reintroduction of the death penalty among other measures, Amnesty International is today drawing public attention to the appalling human rights abuses and overcrowding that have long gone unchecked in two of Belo Horizonte's busiest police stations.

An Amnesty International delegation visited the *Delegacia de Tóxicos (Divisão de Tóxicos e Entorpecentes - Controlled Substances police station)* and the *Delegacia de Roubos e Furtos ( de Crimes Contra o Patrimônio - Robbery and Theft police station)* in October 2001 and found conditions of extreme overcrowding and squalor, lack of medical attention and evidence of corruption among the guards, who extort money from desperate inmates in exchange for basic commodities -- including food and medicines -- and transfers.

"Despite repeated denunciations by national and international human rights organizations and the United Nations Special

Rapporteur Against Torture, prisoners in these police stations continue to endure subhuman conditions -- what could almost be described as a living death -- in which they are denied their most basic humanity," Amnesty International said.

"What is even more disturbing, detainees told us of torture sessions carried out with beatings and electric shocks, and of windowless punishment cells where they are taken after the torture and left naked in solitary confinement for a number of days, without food," the delegates said, adding that these are not isolated cases, as reports of overcrowding and torture are abundant for police stations right across Brazil.

The delegation was alarmed to discover that a long-standing staff member of the *Delegacia de Furtos e Roubos* is known to have been involved in episodes of torture that took place there as long ago as 1969, and to hear that torture methods used in the 1960s are still in use there today.

"This is just one more example of how the Brazilian authorities' chronic failure to investigate the widespread reports of torture and ill-treatment in prisons and police stations, and to punish those responsible, continues to feed the cycle of impunity and abuse," Amnesty International delegates said.

"The situation in these two police stations is symptomatic of the structural problems of the Brazilian criminal justice system, which is coming under increasing strain as the authorities respond to rising crime rates and public pressure by attempting quick fix solutions," the delegates continued.

In November 2001, following mounting international criticism, the Brazilian government launched a nationwide campaign to combat

torture. Four months into the campaign, however, there are concerns that many of the measures adopted fail to address the root causes of torture and the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators.

"The campaign has been undermined by poor funding and lack of a coordinated strategy, and has had very little impact on the lives of the thousands of prisoners who endure torture and ill-treatment throughout Brazil," Amnesty International said.

"What is needed is urgent action on the part of state and federal authorities to improve conditions of detention, stop the violence and abuse by police and prison staff -- including through providing them with adequate resources and training -- and curb the use of excessively punitive sentencing which contributes to extreme overcrowding such as we witnessed in Belo Horizonte."

"The state and federal authorities in Brazil have consistently failed to provide structured and effective long term strategies for reforming public security. This has resulted in the sacrifice of the human rights of a substantial percentage of the Brazilian population to violent, repressive, and corrupt policing methods. At best, these methods have proved ineffective in tackling crime; at worst they have fuelled the spiral of crime and violence that is currently posing a major threat to social stability in the country," Amnesty International concluded.

**\*\*The report will be available on the web at  
<http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/Index/AMR190032002>**

**\*\* Note to picture editors: Photographs from the Amnesty International visit are available. To receive them, please e-mail [pesquisa@amnesty.org](mailto:pesquisa@amnesty.org)**

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