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BRAZIL: PARÁ MASSACRE HIGHLIGHTS NEED FOR IMMEDIATE CHANGES IN INVESTIGATION PROCEDURES

The Pará massacre highlights the urgency of introducing independent and impartial investigations by federal agents into crimes carried out by the police, Amnesty International said today.

“As long as the police forces investigate their own crimes, and as long as unprotected witnesses are too afraid to give evidence, Brazil is likely to witness further tragedies such as the one in Pará,” the organization said.

Amnesty International has repeatedly called for federal agents to take the lead in this type of investigation. The organization believes that independence and impartiality cannot be guaranteed when state authorities investigate crimes committed by their own police forces.

In Pará - where an Amnesty International researcher accompanied the initial stages of the investigation - important forensic evidence was disturbed by the unregistered removal of bodies and the failure to seal off the scene of the massacre. The police did not hand over their weapons until 19 April, and many weapons were not registered to the user.

The Brazilian Government has repeatedly promised to address the lack of federal jurisdiction for such crimes; the problem of such crimes being dealt with in military courts; and the establishment of a witness protection program. Amnesty International is calling for the government to commit itself to a timetable for the urgent resolution of these issues.

“Brazil has no more time to waste - it needs clear-cut procedures for the federal investigation of human rights crimes and for witness protection” Amnesty International said.

**BACKGROUND**

The massacre occurred when about 200 military police were sent to disperse a demonstration of around 1,500 landless peasants on Wednesday 17 April. Although their commanding officer is under house arrest, the policemen directly involved in the violence remain in service. Amnesty International fears for the safety of witnesses.

Autopsies carried out by forensic pathologists on the 19 bodies recovered from the massacre in Pará, confirmed that three of the dead were shot at point blank range. Seven others died of injuries consistent with blows from machetes and scythes, indicating that they had been killed with their own tools after being overpowered.

The number of dead may be much higher than 19. Many of the demonstrators fled into the forest and are still unaccounted for. Eyewitnesses have reported seeing other bodies, including women and children, but a search by army troops was called off on 21 April. On 24 April a bus-driver who returned police to Marabá gave evidence that two wounded peasants were taken to the police battalion. They have not been located since.

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