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Brazil: No one responsible for anything? Massacre trial acquits commanding officers

Today's acquittal of the three military police officers -- who commanded an operation in which 19 rural workers participating in a demonstration were massacred by police -- reinforces the authorities' staggering complacency about serious violations occurring under their authority, Amnesty International said.

"It would appear that in Brazil, when there are human rights violations, no one is responsible for anything," the organization said. "If not challenged, this acquittal will effectively endorse a pact of silence among police involved in the massacre."

"It is incredible that in this case it has not been possible to establish chain-of-command responsibilities for the killings and subsequent cover-up," Amnesty International added. "It is a fundamental principle of human rights protection that those giving orders and in command are also accountable."

The authorities and commanding officers have attempted to characterise the massacre as a case of crowd control gone tragically wrong. However, evidence suggests that police approached the demonstration intending to engage in violence. Military police were allowed by their commanders to remove identification tags, and their weapons registers were destroyed.

Prosecution lawyers allege that a hit-list of rural activist leaders was drawn up and handed to police beforehand by local landowners. Several of the men killed were known leaders of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST). Autopsies revealed that some of the them had been killed in execution-style shootings. Others had been hacked to death with their own farm tools.

Authorities alleged to have ordered the operation have not had to stand trial. The Governor was ruled exempt from prosecution by the Brazilian Supreme Court, the Secretary of Public Security was never charged, the state Commander of Military Police was granted protection from criminal charges by the state legislative assembly.

Prosecution lawyers have said they will appeal against the acquittal of the officers in charge at the scene of the massacre. These same officers have failed to provide information about lower ranks still awaiting trial, that would lead to the identification of those responsible for specific killings and executions. Investigations into the massacre were at best seriously flawed, and at worst deliberately obstructed, making it difficult to establish individual responsibility for the killings.

Background

The largest trial in Brazilian history began on 16 August in the Amazonian state of Pará. 150 policemen face charges for the killing of 19 land reform activists in April 1996 while clearing a demonstration from a highway.

The commanding officers were the first to stand trial. The trial of all 150 police is expected to last several months.

Amnesty International has accompanied seven high profile massacres in Brazil over the last decade. This is the only the third to come to court, and the first in which commanding officers have faced a jury.

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For more information please refer to the full report on the background to this case:

Brazil: Corumbiara and Eldorado de Carajas: Rural violence, police brutality and impunity,
(AMR 19/01/98) on Amnesty International's Web-site: <http://www.amnesty.org>.

You can also call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on 44 171 413 5566.

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