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Brazil: Espírito Santo state under siege -- authorities cannot afford to make mistakes

The long term failure to investigate and prosecute those responsible for systematic human rights abuses has allowed deep rooted corruption to spread through all sectors of the Espírito Santo state authorities. Persistent impunity has undermined the rule of law and democratic values, and is partly responsible for the current crisis in public security, stated Amnesty International today.

The people of Espírito Santo continue to be trapped between the violence of criminal gangs that often operate with the knowledge or complicity of state agents, and state institutions that have consistently failed to protect them, concluded Amnesty International after visiting the state of Espírito Santo.

During their second visit to the state this year, representatives of the organization met with victims of human rights abuses and their families, as well as human rights defenders. They also held meetings with the state authorities and members of the Special Mission set up to investigate links between organised crime, human rights violations and state officials.

Amnesty International has long documented these links, which include the police. The central force in this history of human rights violations is a vigilante group set up in the 1960s called *Scuderie Detetive Le Cocq*.

"*Scuderie Detetive Le Cocq* is not dissimilar to a paramilitary organization," said Amnesty International.

"Killings are often committed by groups of hooded gunmen armed with sophisticated weaponry, who execute people in broad daylight on the basis of information obtained through intelligence networks. Failure by the authorities to disarm and dismantle *Scuderie* or successfully prosecute security force agents linked to it for human rights violations, suggests that the organization operates with official sponsorship at the highest levels."

Many sectors of society, including high ranking state authorities, consulted by Amnesty International pointed to a crisis of public confidence in the state institutions, in particular the legislative assembly and some members of the judiciary, which appear to have tolerated or even supported the activities of *Scuderie* for more than 20 years.

"The present human rights crisis in Espírito Santo is characterised by a lack of independence of

the judiciary, poor quality or compromised police investigations, delays, irregularities, inconclusive judicial proceedings through the public prosecutor's office and a lack of political commitment to address the situation," Amnesty International reported.

In July Amnesty International expressed its concern at the apparent back room deals that lead to a decision not to implement full federal intervention in the state. Despite this, the organization recognises that the Special Mission constitutes a vital first step towards justice.

"However ninety days is insufficient to tackle 20 years of human rights violations and organized crime," Amnesty International said. "The Special Mission must be extended and granted all resources necessary to ensure thorough and effective investigations."

Amnesty International urges the federal government to ensure that the presence of the Special Mission be maintained, and security provided for all those at risk, until those behind the web of organised crime and human rights violations in the state are brought to justice.

"Failure to take effective action against *Scuderie* and its supporters could have tragic consequences," the organization warned, adding: "the Federal authorities cannot afford to get this wrong."

"The imminent exit of the Special Mission could provoke a wave of revenge attacks against human rights activists, witnesses and members of the judicial system who have collaborated with investigations or attempted to expose the atrocities committed by *Scuderie Detetive Le Cocq*," Amnesty International continued.

In an open letter handed to Brazil's presidential candidates last week, Amnesty International called on the future president to ensure that the work of the Special Mission to restore the rule of law to Espírito Santo will continue to receive the full support of the federal government.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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