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Brazil: Espírito Santo -- Witnesses at risk!

The recent killing of one of the principal witnesses in federal police investigations into 'death squads' in the state of Espírito Santo risks overshadowing the few advances made in the case, Amnesty International said today,

Manoel Corrêa da Silva Filho, a suspect testifying against members of the police organisation *Scuderie Detetive le Coq* -- which is believed to be involved in organised crime, unlawful killings, and human rights violations -- was beaten to death less than two hours after being transferred to the Cachoeiro state prison, in Espírito Santo. The transfer was reportedly not authorised by a judge, and federal police did not provide the prison authorities with any recommendations on necessary security provisions for the detainee.

"The way federal police dealt with such an important witness is at best extremely negligent and at worst possibly complicit," Amnesty International said. The organization urged the federal government to ensure that this woeful lack of security and professionalism is not also shown to the human rights defenders fighting to end impunity in the state, who have entrusted their protection to the federal authorities.

"Two months ago, the federal authorities informed Amnesty International of their full commitment to supporting the continued presence of the federal special mission in Espírito Santo. Today, the death of a key witness in federal police investigations and news of a dramatic reduction of the federal police force in the state cast serious doubts over the federal government's real commitment and ability to fulfil its duties," the organization added, stressing that progress made in investigations so far has largely been a result of continued pressure from civil society.

"The fact that state police authorities have taken it upon themselves to investigate the circumstances surrounding the killing of Manoel Corrêa da Silva Filho begs the question of who is really in charge of carrying out investigations in the state and ending its long history of human rights violations and impunity," Amnesty International said, adding that "It is vital that members of the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office be made responsible for all investigations surrounding this and other incidents."

While Amnesty International is aware that the Ministry of Justice has taken steps to remedy some of the concerns raised by the recent killing -- including the dismissal of the head of the federal special mission in the state -- the organization is distressed to note that it took the killing of a vital witness for the authorities to show they are serious about their responsibility towards the situation in Espírito Santo.

Background

Earlier this year the federal Ministry of Justice's Human Rights Council recommended full federal intervention in Espírito Santo. Amnesty International welcomed this as a crucial step in the battle against organised crime, human rights violations and impunity in Brazil (<http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/Index/AMR190092002>).

However the decision to go ahead with this was withheld by the Federal Attorney General following a meeting with president Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Amnesty International expressed its concern that the decision of the Federal Attorney General was directly influenced by political and electoral considerations, as no apparent judicial reasons for the decision have been made public (<http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/Index/AMR190102002>). The Minister of Justice, the head of the Federal police and numerous other federal officials resigned in protest at this decision. Instead of full federal intervention, the new Minister of Justice sent a special investigative mission to the state. The special mission, which was made up mainly of federal police officers is mandated to investigate organised crime and protect those at risk.

Please also see Brazil: Espírito Santo -- Lives on the line, no more empty promises, (<http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/recent/AMR190142002>)

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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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