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Brazil: Human rights policy should not be allowed to turn into window dressing

On the occasion of President Fernando Cardoso's first state visit to the United Kingdom, Amnesty International today called on the Brazilian Government to give more substance to its stated commitment to promoting and protecting human rights.

"A human rights policy should not just be, as the Brazilians would say, *para inglês ver* -- literally translated, "for English eyes", or "window-dressing". It needs ear-marked funding, backed by political will," Amnesty International said.

Recent government initiatives have contributed to put human rights on to Brazil's political agenda. This year, for instance, saw the definition of torture as a crime in the penal code, the creation of a National Human Rights Secretariat, and the proposal of a legislation package aimed at combatting human rights abuses.

However, since May 1996, when the National Human Rights Programme was launched, very little has actually changed on the ground. The police still shoot criminal suspects in cold blood, prisoners are still routinely tortured in police stations and prisons, and very few of those responsible are brought to justice.

Brazil's 1988 Federal Constitution, for example, enshrines wide-ranging guarantees on human rights, but the current penal code still needs to be brought into line with it, and enabling legislation passed. Amnesty International -- which will be discussing these priority areas with the National Secretary for Human Rights, Dr José Gregori, at a meeting in December -- calls on President Cardoso to make five human rights issues a priority over the next year as a matter of urgency:

- the passing of legislation allowing federal involvement in investigating serious human rights abuse;
- the allocation of specific, ear-marked budget funding to a number of human rights projects, such as the federal witness protection program and the National Secretariat for Human Rights;
- the creation of a calendar of action for the implementation of the National Human Rights Program -- which looks good on paper but has not materialized into concrete action;
- the reform of the police, currently under debate in Brazil, to ensure the demilitarization of the force, as well as the implementation of a human rights training programme;
- the implementation of all possible measures to avoid violence and human rights violations in the context of land-related conflict.

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Fiona Macaulay, Brazil Researcher, will be available for interviews during President Cardoso's visit from 1-5 December. She will be happy to brief journalists on the human rights situation in the country. For further information please contact Soraya Bermejo at Amnesty International Pres Office: +44 171 413 5562.

This Amnesty International press release has been sent out as part of a joint, coordinated action with CAFOD, Christian Aid, Oxfam, Anti-Slavery International and Survival International.