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Paraguay: Investigation must lead to justice for Curuguaty killings

Authorities in Paraguay must ensure all those responsible for the deaths of 11 peasants and six police officers in Curuguaty last June are investigated, including police officers present at the eviction, said Amnesty International as charges against 14 peasants were made public yesterday.

On 15 June 2012, 11 peasants and six police officers died and several were injured after clashes erupted during a forced eviction in the Curuguaty district in Paraguay's Canindeyú region. At least 13 peasants were detained on site, including two minors who were later released.

The prosecutor in charge of the investigation announced yesterday that charges had been brought against 14 peasants.

No investigation is being carried out in relation to the police response or their potential responsibility for the deaths.

"It is shocking that no investigation is being conducted into the potential responsibility of the police. According to reports, during the confrontation there were more than 300 officers, many of them with firearms, as opposed to only around 90 peasants," said María José Eva, Researcher at Amnesty International.

According to eyewitnesses, some of the victims were shot dead on site after the confrontation had ended. Eyewitnesses also claim two bodies were found on the contested land the day after the clashes.

An Amnesty International delegation that visited the area last month received information from local organizations and relatives of victims about flaws in the ongoing investigation as well as information about instances of ill-treatment of peasants during police detention.

Parallel investigations from local NGOs raised other lines of investigation, including regarding the potential responsibility of the police in the deaths, but were dismissed by the prosecutor without sufficient explanation, according to defence lawyers.

"While we are still in the process of a detailed analysis of the charges, we are concerned about what appeared to be a lack of a comprehensive investigation and the reported mismanagement of the crime scene. Investigations into these allegations about two bodies found the day after the clashes should be carried out promptly to ensure that no extrajudicial execution or other human rights violations took place," said María José Eva.

The Amnesty International delegation also met with the prosecutor in charge of the investigation. Even though the results on ballistics reports were still pending in November, the public prosecutor said that those responsible for the deaths had already been identified.

“We urge the authorities to take action to ensure that the investigation into the tragic events in Curuguaty, including the police response, is effective, impartial and transparent, and that all those responsible are brought to justice. Impunity cannot prevail in these cases,” said María José Eva.

Background information

The deaths took place in the context of a forced eviction in contested lands in Curuguaty. The lack of clarity regarding ownership of the contested land goes back to the late 1960s when the private company Campos Morombi SAC y A claims to have bought it from La Industrial Paraguaya SA (LIPSA).

Since 2004 peasant communities living in the area requested that the Paraguayan agrarian institute give them those lands, which had allegedly been abandoned for years. However, reports indicate that the land was donated by LIPSA to the Paraguay Army in the 1960s although the title was not registered.

There have been at least seven occupations of this land by the same peasant communities since 2004. They argue that those lands are owned by the Paraguayan State so they should be subject of the land reform and therefore given to peasants.

TESTIMONIES

The names of those interviewed and other details were change to preserve their security.

“We don’t know if it’s my brother who we buried”

Two of Cristina’s brothers died during the confrontation. She spoke to Amnesty International about what happened on Friday 15 June.

“I was desperate because I knew something was happening. My brothers were there, fighting for the land. We could see a lot of police, helicopters, injured. They were brining the injured to the town, but only police officers, the peasants were left there

“One of my brothers was there and said we should go in, that my brother Mauricio was on the ground, injured. I went closer and asked the police if I could go in to help him, but they didn't let me. Then I was also not able to communicate over the phone.

“My brother was hiding, watching everything and he heard a police officer shoot Mauricio, who already had a wound on his leg, and killed him”

The next day, Saturday 16 June, the body of Cristina’s other brother, Miguel, was found.

Both bodies were taken to Asunción for an autopsy. On Sunday, Cristina’s family received the remains of Mauricio and Miguel, wrapped in a black bag, each one on a coffin. A forensic certificate documented that one of them had died as a result of acute bleeding caused by gunshot and the other due to destruction of brain tissue.

“The body has a very strong smell. We don't even know it was my brother Mauricio who we buried. It was very expensive to go to a funeral home and pay for the body to be cleaned so we buried him like that,” Cristina said.

On Monday 18 June, the remains of both brothers were buried.

“The police officers are not being investigated, that’s what we ask for, for them to be investigated. Life changed a lot in the community. At school, children talk. My 6-year-old nephew sees police officers and says ‘a police officer killed my dad’, It’s difficult. We didn't expect this to happen,” she said.

“We ask for the police to be investigated”

The first time Raúl heard about the confrontations in Curuguaty, it was on the radio.

“I was in the city and came to the health centre to see if they brought any of my relatives injured, but they only brought police officers.”

Several hours later, when Raúl was returning home, a neighbour called him to tell him that his son, Esteban, was in hospital.

When he arrived back, Esteban was dead.

“I went to the hospital at 4pm and they didn't let me in. I was only able to go in at 5pm and I found one of my sons injured and Esteban, dead.”

Raúl's injured sons are detained in a jail. For Raúl and his family, it is hard to visit them, as it is very expensive.

“We ask for the police to be investigated, but it is not done,” Raúl explained.