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Brazil: Irene Khan urges government collaboration to end violence

Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan today urged Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to work in collaboration with newly-elected Governors José Serra of São Paulo and Sergio Cabral of Rio de Janeiro to implement much-needed public security reforms to tackle the root causes of violence in Brazil.

"From the extreme criminal violence which is devastating Brazil's cities to the rise of para-policing groups filling the void left by the authorities, little or nothing has been done to redress the social discrimination, corruption and human rights violations at the heart of the country's public security system," said Irene Khan.

"Urban violence is not only costing the country tens of thousands of young lives each year - it is condemning millions of people to greater levels of poverty. Violence is one of the main obstacles to achieving the real inclusion that President Lula promised in his recent inaugural speech," said Irene Khan.

Brazil saw some of the worst cases of criminal violence in its history when drug factions and criminal gangs mounted violent attacks against civilians and police in May last year in the state of São Paulo and subsequently in December in Rio de Janeiro. These attacks were firmly and unequivocally condemned by Amnesty International at the time. However, it is clear that failures to address the problems at the heart of a moribund criminal justice system have directly contributed to the conditions that lead to these attacks.

Amnesty International also highlighted that past state governments have relied on reactive, repressive policies that have had a devastating impact on the poorest communities, increasing the vulnerability of individual police officers and fuelling the violence in cities.

In February, Rio de Janeiro state police forces and members of the elite National Public Security Force took part in their first joint operation when they invaded the favelas that make up the Complexo do Alemão. At least six people, including bystanders, were killed during the operation, which included the use of an armoured car known as the caveirão. After a three-day gun battle police withdrew, claiming to have captured one rifle and one grenade.

In São Paulo the paralysis that beset the city following the wave of criminal attacks was followed by similar violence at the hands of law enforcement officers. Serious concerns remain about police conduct in the wake of the violence and on the impact of organised crime within the prison system and in the periphery of São Paulo.

Also in Rio, the growing and widely reported activities of militias -- para-policing groups of off-duty police officers controlling favelas through a combination of military style force, intimidation and extortion -- is an extremely worrying development, symptomatic of the vacuum left for many years by the state. These neighbourhoods are now being contested by displaced drug traffickers in a phase that heralds yet more violence for the city in 2007.

"If criminal and police violence is to be rooted out of Brazil's urban centres, public security, in the broadest possible sense of the term, must be addressed with urgency. Only through inclusive policies on sanitation, health, education and professional policing aimed at integrating areas that have slipped out of the orbit of the state, will long-term progress be made."

Amnesty International has written to President Lula and Governors Cabral and Serra to express concerns regarding the human rights situation in Brazil. The organization hopes this will begin a dialogue regarding protection and promotion of human rights for all Brazilians.

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