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Brazil: More civilians killed

Women and children continue to be slain in Rio de Janeiro, with little or no reaction from the authorities.

Sixty-four-year-old Alice da Silva was shot dead this week as she crouched against the wall of her house desperately trying to protect her two grandchildren. She was sheltering from a reported shoot-out between drug traffickers and the police when a bullet passed through the wall of her house and entered her chest.

Alice was the latest victim of a two week long police operation, aimed at capturing drug traffickers in the Complexo do Alemão -- a cluster of 21 communities in Rio de Janeiro housing some 200,000 people. During the operation, residents complained of threats, intimidation, beatings and property damage. There have been reckless incursions by armoured vehicles, known as "caveirões" (literally "big skulls"). Police reportedly cut off water supplies and electricity in some communities, allegedly firing shots into electricity generators. Curfews imposed by the police prevented residents from going to work and children from going to school. Residents have complained that they are being "treated like criminals" by the police, and are scared to leave their homes.

The police operation in the Complexo do Alemão amounts to excessive use of force as well as gross insensitivity towards the residents who the police are supposed to be serving. The authorities must thoroughly investigate all incidents of violence, intimidation and damage of property during the occupation of the Complexo do Alemão and bring those responsible to justice.

This operation fits into a pattern of violent, discriminatory policing operations against Rio's poorer communities, long documented by Amnesty International. Since September, four children have been killed by stray bullets during police operations, and a seven-year-old was recently run over by a police car in Vigário Geral.

It is time to put an end to a public security policy which endangers lives of all residents in Rio's poorer communities, and does nothing to combat the growth of drug-related crime. Only through serious, long-term measures which engage constructively with these communities, providing day-to-day police protection as well as basic public services, will the authorities begin to turn the tide in Rio de Janeiro. As the second round of the state and presidential elections approaches, candidates must address the long-term policy vacuum in this area.

