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Brazil: One more human rights defender lost to the scourge of ‘death-squads’

The assassination of Manoel Mattos, vice-president of the workers’ party in the state of Pernambuco and human rights activist, is a predictable consequence of the failure of the authorities to combat the scourge of death-squads and police corruption across the north east of Brazil, said Amnesty International today.

On 24 January, two hooded men broke into Manoel Mattos’ house and shot him in the chest at point blank range. Mattos had received repeated death threats as a result of his work denouncing killings and abuses by death-squads across north-east Brazil. Despite the threats, federal police had recently withdrawn the protection he was receiving, allegedly because they felt it was no longer necessary.

“Manoel Mattos’ killing highlights the dual failures of the federal and state authorities to effectively protect those fighting at the frontline of human rights and combat death-squads,” said Tim Cahill, Brazil researcher at Amnesty International.

Amnesty International calls on the Brazilian federal police to initiate an immediate investigation into the killing of Manoel Mattos and the circumstances surrounding the withdrawal of his protection. It is important that this case is addressed at federal level as part of a broader investigation into the activities of death-squads across the north-east.

The organization also calls for the Brazilian authorities to immediately announced how it will begin to address the recommendations of the Brazilian Congress’ Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on death-squads in the north-east of the country and to end the activities of these criminal gangs in the region.

Background Information

Manoel Mattos, a member of the local bar association’s human rights commission, had long campaigned against the spread of death squads and police violence in the north-east of Brazil. He testified and provided evidence to a federal parliamentary inquiry into death squads in the north-east of Brazil, in which he described how these groups worked in the border area between the states of Pernambuco and Paraíba. In one document produced in collaboration with the prosecutor’s office he denounced over 100 homicides by members of local death squads. He also gave testimony to the then UN Special Rapporteur on Summary, Arbitrary and Extra-Judicial executions during her visit to Brazil in 2003.

Amnesty International has long documented and denounced the spread of death-squads and militias across Brazil. These are groups which ostensibly offer alternative security to local businesses, often with the aim of extra judicially-executing criminal suspects. In all cases death-squads are largely made up of active or former law enforcement officers. Amnesty International has received evidence which suggest that many or most of these groups are directly involved in organised crime.

In November 2006 the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry (CPI) of the lower house of Congress on “death-squad” activity in the North-East of the country published its final report which detailed activity in nine states. According to one of the parliamentarians responsible for the report, all cases involved active or former police officers. The report found profound links between state officials, economic actors and organised crime across the North-East.

In his report on his visit to Brazil in November 2007, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions stated that, “the public prosecution service in Pernambuco estimated that approximately 70% of the homicides in Pernambuco are committed by death squads,” and that according to a federal parliamentary commission of inquiry “80% of the crimes caused by extermination groups involve police or ex-police.”

Amnesty International continues to receive constant reports of human rights defenders who are not being provided effective protection. This organization recognises that the human rights defenders programme instituted by the government was an important first step. However, it falls short of its promised aims and numerous defenders continue to be at risk.

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