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Brazil must address needs of thousands left homeless following eviction

Amnesty International has called on the Brazilian authorities to urgently address the needs of some 1,600 families made homeless by a forced eviction in a settlement in São Paulo state, Brazil.

The eviction, which has been ongoing since Sunday, was carried out without prior warning, while negotiations were still under way and without provision of alternative housing.

Violent clashes between police and residents continued into Monday after a state judge ordered almost 2,000 police officers into the Pinheirinho settlement on the outskirts of São José dos Campos. Police authorities say the eviction will finish tomorrow.

“This eviction violates a raft of international standards,” said Atila Roque, the director of Amnesty International, Brazil.

“The operation was carried out in a deeply inappropriate manner: early in the morning on a Sunday and without any adequate warning. It was pushed through even though negotiations with authorities to find a peaceful way out were ongoing,” he said.

Police descended on the area without warning at 6am on Sunday in riot gear, backed up by armoured cars and helicopters and using tear gas and rubber bullets. The authorities cut electricity, gas and telephone lines and cordoned off the area, restricting access to homes.

Some 30 people have been arrested after some residents of the eight-year-old settlement resisted the eviction with barricades, burning cars and throwing rocks and sticks.

The eviction order went against a previous agreement to suspend the eviction while a peaceful solution was sought, including the possibility that the federal government could buy the land and legalise the residents’ land titles.

A number of residents have gone to stay with relatives, while others – around 350 families - have been housed in a gymnasium with inadequate sanitation. Some have been allowed back into the evicted area to collect belongings before houses are demolished.

The Pinheirinho settlement was formed in 2004, when groups of homeless people occupied abandoned land belonging to a bankrupt investment firm.

Churches, football pitches, libraries and shops have sprung up in the area and local residents have been trying to legalize the situation through a state government programme called Cidade Legal, but without success.

The residents association are now appealing to the Superior Federal Court (STF) for the eviction order to be overturned.

“What is happening in Pinheirinho is part of an unfortunate pattern of forced evictions in Brazil: as the country booms, tens of thousands of poor families are being removed to make way for infrastructure and private development projects, without receiving adequate protection and alternative housing,” said Atila Roque.

“The Brazilian authorities must immediately address the needs of the thousands of people who now have been left homeless. They must actively engage with the residents to find a long-term solution that suits their needs – not temporary spaces in shelters which split up families,” he added.

Despite considerable investment by the federal government, Brazil struggles with a huge housing deficit and millions of people across the country live in irregular settlements.

Under international law, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights (ICESCR), Brazil is prohibited from carrying out forced evictions, and must protect people from forced evictions.

This work forms part of Amnesty International’s Demand Dignity campaign, which focuses on human rights violations that drive and deepen poverty. Under the campaign, Amnesty International is focusing on human rights violations against people living in informal settlements and slums.