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Brazil: Violence in Rio de Janeiro - a challenge for change

Amnesty International is seriously concerned that there appears to be no end to the fear, criminal violence and police excess to which hundreds of thousands of Rio de Janeiro's poorest citizens have been condemned.

Reports of new attacks by rival drug gangs on the Vila Kennedy favela in Rio de Janeiro's zona oeste, suggest that the brutality that shook the city for the last two weeks is still not at an end.

The violent gang turf wars and militaristic police operations, that have marked this period in the city, have reinforced concerns that beyond a few government projects their remains far more to be done to ensure that millions of favela residents can live safely in their homes.

Gang conflict over territory initiated the violence, following an attempt to invade the Morro do Macaco on 17 October. Drug factions placed thousands of lives at risk, forcibly evicted families in neighbouring favelas and drove others from their homes in fear for their lives. Thousands of children were unable to go to school, while workers and business owners were unable to go to work.

During the invasion, drug traffickers reportedly shot down a police helicopter killing three officers. Amnesty International condemns the actions of the drug factions, including the killing of the three police officers. Such attacks against the police not only undermine the rights of individual officers but of all whose rights the police force is meant to protect.

Over the last week Amnesty International has received numerous letters from police officers expressing concern at their situation and demanding support. These letters highlight how the state has failed to guarantee the rights and conditions for officers working in extreme conditions undermining efforts to protect the most vulnerable communities.

Yet, the state's response to these attacks has only served to increase the insecurity in many of these communities. Amnesty International has long denounced the persistent reliance by the state on military style incursions using excessive and uncontrolled force. Such operations place innocent lives at risk, discriminate whole communities and fail to bring the security that residents demand from those mandated to protect their human rights.

A number of bystanders were caught up in the violence, including:

- A 24-year-old mother, Ana Cristina Costa do Nascimento, who was shot dead while trying to protect her 11 month old baby daughter, as she walked towards a bus stop outside Kelson's favela. The baby was hit in the arm by the bullet that killed her mother, and is now in a serious condition in hospital. Family members accuse the police who were carrying out an operation in the area.
- A 15-year-old boy was shot in the head when he went to put the garbage out in favela Mandela III. Residents claim the bullet came from the police who were carrying out an operation in the area; the police have strenuously denied involvement.
- 18-year-old high school student, Guimarães da Costa, who wearing school uniform and standing outside his school, was shot in the back in Vila Cruzeiro during a police operation.

Seven people have been killed by stray bullets in the last week. All these cases must be fully and independently investigated.

Amnesty International recognises that over the last few years the federal government and the state government have begun to understand the need for a different approach to the excessive levels of armed criminality in its urban centres, as seen in recent small-scale projects, based on non-violent policing.

However, human rights and effective security cannot be restricted to a few projects. The time has come for all governments, federal, state and municipal to work to include all of Rio de Janeiro's citizens under the state's full protection, whatever their address and whatever the colour of their skin. It must no longer be acceptable for workers, mothers, school children or pensioners to live under the control of armed criminals or in fear of the very officials charged with their protection. Rio de Janeiro and Brazil must meet this challenge if they are to live up to their future.

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