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Brazil: Caveirão -- Rio's real "bogeyman"

11-year-old Carlos Henrique was on his way home when police stormed the Vila do João favela in July 2005. According to eyewitnesses, he was shot in the head by a bullet fired from a military-style vehicle, popularly known as the caveirão. Between May and September 2005, 11 people were killed in operations involving the caveirão.

"The caveirão has become a powerful symbol of the failings of public security policies in Rio de Janeiro. It typifies the police's confrontational and divisive approach to Rio's public security crisis," said Marcelo Freixo of Global Justice at the launch of a campaign against the use of the caveirão in Brazil's favelas.

The campaign, organized by Amnesty International, Global Justice, the Rede de Comunidades e Movimentos contra a Violência, and the Centro de Defesa de Direitos Humanos de Petrópolis will call on Rio's state governor, Sra. Rosângela Rosinha Garotinho de Oliveira, to take forward a comprehensive reform of Rio's security policies, particularly around favelas. Specifically, the NGOs are calling on the state authorities to stop using the caveirão to kill indiscriminately, to intimidate whole communities and to mount operations involving the excessive use of force.

"Using violence to combat violence is fundamentally counter-productive. Not only does it lead to tragic deaths of innocent bystanders, but it does not solve the problems of escalating criminal violence in Rio de Janeiro," said Marcelo Freixo.

The caveirão has become the scourge of Rio's favela communities. Painted black, and emblazoned with a skull impaled on a sword -- the emblem of Rio's elite police force, the Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais, (BOPE) -- the caveirão is feared by residents in the areas it operates and has been involved in a string of human rights abuses. Local human rights organizations have received a series of shocking eyewitness reports of caveirões entering communities firing at random, while using loudspeakers to intimidate the population.

"By deploying a vehicle to aggressively and indiscriminately target whole communities, the authorities are using the caveirão as a tool of intimidation. The police have a legitimate right to protect themselves as they go about their work but they also have a duty to protect the communities they serve," said Tim Cahill Amnesty International's researcher on Brazil.

The overall police strategy when dealing with Rio's security crisis has polarised its population, and

lead to a collapse of confidence in the state's ability to protect all the city's citizens.

Security for all will never be achieved through violence and intimidation. An inclusive public security policy based on respect for human rights must be introduced without delay. Only then will there be an end to the cycle of violence in Rio de Janeiro.

Background information

In October 2005, Global Justice launched the report "Police Violence and Public Insecurity", which examines the root causes of violence in Rio de Janeiro today. The report concluded that state policy effectively "criminalised poverty", concentrating violence in the city's most vulnerable communities.

In December 2004, Amnesty International launched its report, "They come in Shooting: Policing socially excluded communities in Brazil" which places human rights abuses in the context of state neglect and social exclusion.

People from around the world - from Mongolia to Norway, India to Chile - will be joining with local NGOs to campaign against the use of the caveirão in the shanty towns of Rio de Janeiro.

For a copy of Global Justice's report "Police Violence and Public Insecurity", please see:

http://www.global.org.br/english/arquivos/rio_report1.pdf (English)

http://www.global.org.br/portuguese/arquivos/relatorio_rio1.pdf (Portuguese)

For a copy of Amnesty International's report "They come in Shooting: Policing socially excluded communities in Brazil", please see:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr190252005> (English)

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