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‘CHANGING THIS DEADLY SCENARIO’

DEMAND DIGNITY IN BRAZIL’S FAVELAS

**FREEDOM FROM VIOLENCE
IS A HUMAN RIGHT**

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**





'A week with shooting means one or perhaps two weeks without work. Electricity and water supplies have also sometimes been cut off. You never know when shooting is going to start... You don't know which way to run. The only really safe place here is the toilet... Why should we have to put up with this?'

Maria Lúcia Almedia, Complexo do Alemão, April 2008

On 27 June 2007, 1,350 police officers launched a so-called "mega-operation" against the drug factions embedded in the favelas (shanty towns) that make up the Complexo do Alemão in the north of Rio de Janeiro. The authorities trumpeted the success of the operation, claiming that 19 suspected drug traffickers had been killed and that police had captured 13 guns and a few kilos of drugs. The operation was the culmination of a series of incursions in the months leading up to the 2007 Pan-American games.

Today the drug factions remain in control of the lives of more than 180,000 residents of the Complexo do Alemão. Countless women and children are at risk of extreme psychological trauma as a result of sustained periods of gunfire. Homes and businesses have been destroyed. Schools and crèches have been closed for long stretches. For long periods the communities lacked access to water, electricity and rubbish collection. The people of the Complexo do Alemão, once again abandoned by the state, will bear the scars of the incursion for years to come.

In thousands of favelas throughout Brazil, whole communities are living trapped in poverty and excluded from a whole range of services. Years of state neglect have created a vacuum which has been filled by criminal gangs. These gangs now control everyday life in many communities, imposing curfews, meting out fines and punishments, and deciding who will get work, housing, health care or education, and who will not.

'We've reached the point when we have to ask for help. We can't bear to lose any more friends, relatives and children to armed violence. Changing this deadly scenario is urgent.'

Hércules Mendes, President of the Caracol residents' association, Complexo de Penha, Rio Da Janeiro, March 2007

The emergence of *milícias* – para-policing groups made up of off-duty police officers, prison guards, former soldiers and firefighters – in some of Rio de Janeiro's poorest communities has intensified already unbearable levels of insecurity and violence. In communities abandoned by the state, the *milícias* are challenging drug gangs for control. A 2008 parliamentary inquiry into the role of the *milícias* uncovered a web of protection rackets, electoral malpractice and extensive links between corrupt police officers and state and municipal politicians.

Federal and state authorities have acknowledged that public security practices need to be reformed. However, despite overwhelming evidence that violent policing is not effective in delivering security, their promises of reform quickly disappear before the slightest public demand for tougher security measures. Some state governments continue to support increasingly repressive and violent policing that places bystanders at risk and further entrenches violence, alienation and deprivation. Heavily armed police incursions into communities are costly

in terms of human life and counter-productive. After the police have withdrawn, the drug factions are free to reassert their control.

Many families of victims of shootings, already struggling to survive, are driven even deeper into poverty by the death or injury of the son or father on whom they depended. In interviews with Amnesty International, women whose relatives had been killed during police operations were at pains to point out that the relative lost was a "worker" or a "student", not a criminal. They are challenging the indifference and discrimination in much of Brazilian society that brands all those living in favelas as criminals merely because of

The population of São Paulo exploded in the 1960s and 1970s as industrial developments drew in migrants from other parts of the country. The lack of planning and provision for these communities means that the city continues to face a housing crisis. Around half the population live precariously in favelas on the periphery, tenement blocks or squats. According to the UN Special Rapporteur on adequate housing, some 10,000 sleep on the streets of São Paulo every night.

Against this background, the occupation between 2002 and 2007 of the Prestes Maia building (which had stood empty for over a decade) became a focal point for protest by homeless families and NGOs trying to put pressure on the authorities to take action.

Despite the constant threat of eviction, the families of Prestes Maia created a vibrant community. Pooling their limited funds,

Cover: A couple with a young baby flee their house while a military police officer picks his way down an alley during a major police operation in Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, 2005. Rocinha is one of the largest favelas in Brazil.

Elas na Favela © Dafne Capella



'Down there, in the rich part of town, it's different. They think that the police really have to invade, really have to kill, really have to exterminate everything that goes on here. They just don't see that this is a community with people who work and children that study.'

Lúcia Cabral, Complexo do Alemão, April 2008

where they live. It is this ingrained prejudice that allows police to get away with violations and makes escape from the cycle of violence and deprivation all the harder.

A range of factors conspires to ensure that those living in favelas remain excluded.

Housing conditions in the favelas are perhaps the most obvious and damning indictment of the extent to which the state has abnegated its responsibilities towards these communities. Housing is poor, inadequate and insecure. Even where new housing has been built, the failure to ensure adequate standards of housing and services

in some of them shows how little thought was given to the lives that would be lived in them.

Health workers are often reluctant to enter these communities because of fear or prejudice, which restricts residents' access to essential services. One of the consequences is extremely low levels of ante-natal and maternity care; women in socially excluded communities, and especially women of Afro-Brazilian descent, are at greater risk of death during childbirth.

Access to education is a key part of helping people to lift themselves out of poverty. However, extensive research by UNESCO

has shown that schools in Brazil are extremely violent places. And outside on the streets, the dangers to the children of the favelas are daunting. Drug factions are reported to use children as young as five as *aviãozinhos* (messenger boys) and so start to incorporate them into gang culture. Childcare facilities in these communities are virtually non-existent.

The state's response to the needs of those living in favelas reveals entrenched discrimination. What services and security measures are available have been imposed without consultation – which perhaps helps explain why they have been so ineffective.



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Ivaneti de Araujo, an MSTC co-ordinator, speaks to a crowd of people occupying the Prestes Maia building, 2007.

they ran a crèche, a library, a cinema and arts events. Under the aegis of the Homeless Movement of Central São Paulo (Movimento Sem Teto do Centro, MSTC), the new residents removed some 300 truckloads of rubbish, and cleaned out parts of the building that were a metre deep in sewage.

Despite threats and at times apparently insurmountable obstacles, the Prestes Maia occupation was an extraordinary success. Following extensive national and international campaigning, all residents were promised new housing around the city.

‘There is no point in investing only in public security and dismantling the structures if you do not put a school in their place or a health centre.’

National Rapporteur for Education, October 2007



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Some of the few community security projects which have been set up have had some impact in improving security and so helping to end the cycle of deprivation and violence. However, such initiatives remain the exception. Most public security policy remains violent and confrontational. The needs of the millions of people living in deprived communities are not taken into consideration. Their fears and aspirations are simply not heard by those in power.

Dynamic organizations promoting the rights of homeless people and those living in informal settlements continue to voice these long ignored needs and demands. In the face of gross neglect and pervasive violence, they are demanding adequate water, sanitation, health care, childcare and education services, appropriate and secure housing, and policing that helps eradicate violence and crime rather than further entrenching it.

Residents of the Complexo do Alemão meet, in October 2006, to protest against police violence and human rights violations during invasive operations. Behind them the banner says, “The police must treat the population of the Complexo do Alemão with respect and equality because favela residents also pay taxes.”

The evidence is overwhelming. No strategy based on the criminalization of entire communities can deliver sustainable security. Actively engaging with communities to address social deprivation, exclusion and criminal and police violence has the potential to protect human rights, deliver justice and safeguard human dignity. Amnesty International has consistently called on the Brazilian federal and state authorities to work with local communities, and not against them, in order to tackle the problems of violence, deprivation and exclusion in the favelas.

ACT NOW

Amnesty International is calling on governments to:

Ensure that people living in slums have equal access to adequate housing and public services

Governments must combat direct and indirect discrimination against people living in slums. Legislation and provisions that have a discriminatory effect must be reviewed, amended or repealed. Governments must ensure that all communities have equal access to water, sanitation, health care, education and that clear targets are set for the provision of these services. Procedures and policies should be established that ensure people living in slums have access to relevant information and processes so that they can influence decisions that impact on their lives, directly or indirectly.

Introduce human-rights based policing and ensure the active participation of people living in slums in developing and implementing security plans

Governments must introduce credible and effective investigation mechanisms for dealing with complaints about police abuses against deprived and excluded communities. They should introduce statutory and procedural codes to ensure that policing is based on international human rights standards, in particular the UN Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials and the UN Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms by Law Enforcement Officials. Governments must also ensure the removal of barriers preventing people living in slums from actively participating in the creation of comprehensive public security plans for the protection of human rights.

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Amnesty International is a global movement of 2.2 million people in more than 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion – funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

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