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# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICE 87/93

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**BRAZIL: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL DELEGATE INVESTIGATES KILLINGS OF STREET CHILDREN IN RIO DE JANEIRO**

An Amnesty International delegate is in Rio de Janeiro to gather information and speak with relevant authorities about the killing of at least seven street children, the wounding of another street child and a young adult in Rio de Janeiro on Friday 23 July 1993.

According to information received by Amnesty International, a group of about 50 street children were sleeping rough beside Candelaria Church in the heart of Rio de Janeiro when a group of gunmen - some of them hooded - opened fire on them. Four boys died instantly, a fifth was shot and killed as he ran from the church and two more boys were shot dead in the nearby gardens of the Museum of Modern Art. An eighth teenager is in hospital in a coma and a young adult was critically wounded in the same incident. Other children are reported to have also been wounded. Among those killed were Paulo Roberto de Oliveira, aged 11, and Marcelo Candido de Jesus, aged 14.

According to reports, survivors of the massacre alleged that the gunmen identified themselves as members of the police. It is alleged that the day before the killing the children had stoned a military police car injuring a police officer, after one youth was detained for glue sniffing. The children allege that they were threatened by the military police officers.

Extrajudicial executions of adults as well as children are carried out in urban areas of Brazil by "death squads" - vigilante groups, often composed of off-duty police officers. They are funded by local businessmen, who wish to 'clean up' their neighbourhoods of social undesirables, robbers and petty thieves, and street children, who may themselves have been drawn into crime.

In a letter sent on 26 July to the Minister of Justice and the Governor of Rio de Janeiro, Amnesty International expressed its profound concern at the killings under circumstances which suggest extrajudicial executions by members of the police. The organization is deeply anxious for the safety of street children in Brazil's main cities and has urged the authorities to take all necessary steps at all levels to thoroughly investigate this grave human rights violation. It also urged the authorities to provide safeguards to protect the life and physical integrity of all witnesses of the crime and the street children of Rio de Janeiro.

The acting Minister of External Relations replied to Amnesty International, expressing President Itamar Franco's repudiation of the crime and the President's determination that the Minister of Justice use all available means to make sure that the perpetrators are brought to justice. Three military police officers have reportedly been arrested after being identified by one of the survivors of the killings.

Over the years Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Brazilian government to send a clear message through the chain of command of the civil and military police forces, that unlawful killing and all forms of physical or psychological torture and ill-treatment are forbidden and will be punished with the full force of the law. The Brazilian government has enacted new legislation and formed national and state councils to protect children and adolescents; Parliamentary Commissions at national and state levels have been created to monitor and report on human rights violations against children and adolescents.

Although Amnesty International has welcomed these measures, up to now they have not been effective in stopping the killings of street children and adolescents. Amnesty International believes that the only solution to this grave situation is to put an end to the impunity which the majority of those responsible still enjoy. In most cases the Brazilian authorities have failed to bring to justice the alleged perpetrators of abuses against the street children.

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EMBARGOED FOR 9 AUGUST 1993

LAOS: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CALLS FOR RELEASE OF PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE AND REVIEW OF UNFAIR TRIAL OF POLITICAL PRISONERS

"Freedom of expression is still denied in Laos," said Amnesty International today, launching an action urging the Lao Government to release all prisoners of conscience immediately and to review the cases of six political prisoners sentenced on 4 November 1992.

At the trial, three prisoners of conscience, held since October 1990 for peacefully advocating political and economic reform in Laos, were sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment and three other political prisoners were sentenced to life imprisonment, after being held without charge or trial for 17 years. Amnesty International believes the 4 November trial did not meet international standards for fair trial and is urging that all six are granted appeal against their sentences on grounds of unfair trial.

The three prisoners of conscience, Thongsouk Saysangkhi, Latsami Khamphoui and Feng Sakchittaphong, were arrested on 8 October 1990 after circulating letters addressed to the country's leadership, criticizing its political and economic systems. Thongsouk Saysangkhi had been Deputy Minister of Science and Technology but resigned in August 1990 after criticizing the government for "restricting popular liberties and democracy." Latsami Khamphoui, a former Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, had reportedly circulated letters citing official "corruption" and the "victimization" of government critics.

They had criticized Laos' political and economic systems and held meetings at which the creation of a multi-party political system was advocated. Feng Sakchittaphong, a Ministry of Justice official, had reportedly joined the two others in writing an article advocating multi-party democracy.

In November 1990, the government-controlled media accused the three men, all in their mid-50s, of "treason" and in August 1991 they were accused of acting "against the law to overthrow the administration". In spite of these accusations, no formal charges were known to have been brought against them before their trial and, contrary to both Lao and international law, they were held for two years in dark solitary confinement cells in Samkhe prison in Vientiane.

On 4 November 1992, they were finally brought before the People's Court in Sam Neua, capital of Houa Phan province, a remote northeastern province of Laos on the border with Viet Nam. They were charged under the Lao Criminal Code for "making preparations to stage a rebellion and for conducting propaganda against the Lao People's Democratic Republic, gathering groups of people to create disturbances and carry out slanderous charges against other people, and creating disorders in imprisonment."

They were reportedly denied access to a defence lawyer and the prosecution apparently failed to provide evidence to support its allegations. Amnesty International believes the language of the articles under which they were charged is so elastic as to allow the authorities to prosecute people for the peaceful exercise of their basic human rights, even if they have committed no recognizably criminal offence. These articles make no distinction between violent activities which pose a real and exceptional threat to the security of the state and the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression and assembly. After the trial the three men were taken to Sop Hao Central prison, where Amnesty International believes they are being held in incommunicado detention.

Amnesty International is urging the Government of Laos to review the cases of the three other political prisoners, Pangthong Chokbengboun, Boonlu Nammathao and Sing Chanthakoummane, to clarify whether their trial was carried out in accordance with all appropriate international standards. The organization is calling for the government to make public full details of the trial proceedings and the evidence on which the charges were based. It is also urging the Government of Laos to allow all the political prisoners the right of appeal against their sentences.

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