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## **Brazil: Freedom of expression under threat - para-police torture reporters**

Press freedom and the protection of human rights is being jeopardised by the brutal actions of criminal gangs made up of off-duty police officers in Rio de Janeiro, said Amnesty International, as reports emerged of the kidnap and torture of a team of reporters by a para-policing group, known locally as milicias.

“Amnesty International welcomes the assurance by State Secretary of Public Security José Beltrame that investigations will be carried out into these horrific crimes. Those responsible have to be held accountable for these abuses and steps have to be taken urgently to dismantle the milicias,” said Tim Cahill, Amnesty International’s researcher on Brazil.

“So far, the Rio de Janeiro government has fallen far short of its responsibility to combat these criminal para-policing groups. This reinforces their sense of legitimacy.”

On 14 May in the community of Batan, Rio de Janeiro, three staff from the local daily newspaper O Dia, and a resident, were held and tortured for several hours by members of the local milicia. Batan is one of several communities where control has been wrested from drug gangs by these criminal para-policing groups.

The three members of O Dia, two men and one woman, were living under cover in Batan to investigate the actions of the milicias.

“The torture they suffered and the courage they showed, has served to finally decimate the myth, perpetuated by certain politicians and media pundits, that the milicias are providing effective protection against crime and violence,” said Tim Cahill.

“The work of journalists is essential in bringing to light the human rights violations suffered by the most vulnerable communities in Rio de Janeiro and around the world.”

### **Background Information**

The milicias consist of off-duty police officers and firemen. Many favela residents have described how they control communities with violence, while extorting money for the provision of security, as well as gas, transport, cable TV and other services. They are accused of wielding political power by guaranteeing, through intimidation, votes for certain state deputies.

Though they have existed in Rio de Janeiro for some time, their sudden expansion dates back to December 2006, when over 100 favelas were invaded by milicia groups. There appears to be little doubt that the growth of these groups can be attributed to decades of public security policy based on negligence, human rights violations and impunity of perpetrators, allowing criminal and corrupt police officers to thrive at the cost of

those working tirelessly to serve the community.

The policy of hardline policing, defended only last week by Governor Sergio Cabral, based on high numbers of killings and military-style operations, has been proved to be seriously flawed. In his recent summary report presented to the UN Human Rights Council, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary and arbitrary executions stated that the governor's strategy has been, "politically driven and amounts to policing by opinion poll," stressing that it is "counterproductive".

The state government has persistently sought to defend its lack of action against militias through legal technicalities and operational excuses, while justifying the discriminatory and repressive operations against drug factions. Neither has provided the security that millions of favela residents desperately crave as communities across Rio de Janeiro continues to be dominated by drug factions and militias.