

Human rights report cites Brazil for torture, police killings

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A report released this week by Human Rights Watch (HRW) cited the government of Brazil for widespread torture, police killings and a continuing amnesty for crimes carried out under the country's former military dictatorship.

The recently inaugurated government of Workers Party President Dilma Rousseff responded to the charges with a statement emphasizing its commitment to creating a "truth commission." While this proposed body would investigate the mass torture, disappearances and extrajudicial executions carried out under the military regime that ruled the country from 1964 to 1985, it would be powerless to indict any of those responsible for these crimes.

The HRW report points to the massive scale of police violence in Brazil. During the first six months of 2010 alone, according to its figures, police in the state of Rio de Janeiro killed 505 people. This amounts to "roughly three police killings per day, or at least one police killing for every six "regular" homicides," the document states.

It also cites the findings of a 2009 HRW study, which "found that police in Sao Paulo state had killed more people over the prior five years than had police in all of South Africa, a country with a higher homicide rate than Sao Paulo."

In addition to the slaughter carried out by police while on duty, the HRW document points to the widespread reports of police operating within unofficial militias and death squads that terrorize entire neighborhoods, carrying out extortion, killings and other violent crimes.

The document cites the execution of 23 people in the Santos region of state of Sao Paulo in April 2010 at the hands of a police death squad known as the "Ninjas." It also points to the conviction of four military policemen last July for the murder and decapitation of a mentally disabled person. They were charged with being part of another death squad known as the "Highlanders," whose name was "derived from the group's practice of cutting off the heads and hands of their victims in an effort to cover up their crime (a practice from the 1986 fictional film *Highlander*)."

This gruesome activity was acknowledged by the

government's own office on human rights, whose head, Fermino Fecchio Filho, told the daily *O Globo* earlier this month, "Extermination groups are generalized and throughout Brazil. You don't have an extermination group if the police are not involved." He added that both the police and the courts were complicit in covering up these crimes.

Last November saw a qualitative escalation of this endemic police violence, with the invasion of two of Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, or shantytown slums, by a combined force of the military police Special Operations Battalion together with regular Brazilian army and navy troops. The invasion of the Vila Cruzeiro and Complexo do Alemão *favelas* employed tanks, armored cars, helicopters and assault rifles, leaving scores dead.

In addition, the HRW report described torture as a "chronic problem" within the country's prison system, which is "plagued by inhumane conditions, violence and severe overcrowding." It noted that 44 percent of those behind bars are pretrial detainees, convicted of no crimes.

The report cites the findings of Brazil's National Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on the Penitentiary System, which found widespread "physical and psychological torture" in the country's prisons. It highlighted conditions in the state of Goias where members of the National Security Force "subjected female detainees to kicks and electric shocks, stepped on the abdomen of a pregnant woman, and forced another woman to strip naked."

Conditions are, if anything, even worse in juvenile detention centers run by the General Department of Socio-Educational Measures (DEGASE). "In 2010, 44 DEGASE agents were charged with participating in a torture session in 2008 that resulted in the death of one juvenile and left another 20 injured," the report states.

Underlying this criminal state violence is the immense gap between the wealthy elite and the masses of working people in a country that remains one of the most socially unequal (the eighth worst in the world, according to a recent United Nations Development Program study). The minimal social assistance programs introduced by the Workers Party

government under former President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva have done little to bridge this chasm, even as the country's financiers and corporate chiefs have amassed ever-greater amounts of wealth.

Undoubtedly, another factor in fueling this state violence is the absolute impunity enjoyed by the country's security forces for the criminal repression carried out during the period of military rule. Torture, extra-judicial executions and illegal detentions were carried out for years as state policy and were never punished.

"Brazil has never prosecuted those responsible for atrocities committed during the period of its military dictatorship (1964-1985)," the HRW report points out. "A 1979 amnesty law has thus far been interpreted to bar the prosecutions of state agents, an interpretation reaffirmed in April 2010 by the Supreme Federal Tribunal."

While both Uruguay, last year, and Argentina in 2005 saw courts strike down similar laws granting impunity to the torturers and murderers of those country's dictatorships, in Brazil, the amnesty imposed by the former dictator, Gen. Joao Baptista Figueiredo, in 1979 remains firmly in place.

Last December, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights—rejecting the April ruling by the Brazilian Supreme Federal Tribunal—found the law illegal and ordered the Brazilian government to conduct a criminal investigation into the killing, torture and disappearance of 70 people, including farmers and members of the Communist Party of Brazil, during military operations to crush resistance to the dictatorship in the early 1970s in Araguaia in northern Brazil.

While during her election campaign last year, Dilma Rousseff vowed to bring human rights violators to justice, since her inauguration there is every indication that she will continue the policy pursued by the former president, Lula, in attempting to placate the country's powerful military.

In her January 1 inauguration speech, Rousseff, who in her early twenties was part of a resistance group and was imprisoned and tortured by the dictatorship, declared that she harbored neither "remorse nor resentments nor rancor" for what happened during that period. She likewise called upon the military to reject any "revanchism" and not to "glorify" the military coup that overthrew Brazil's elected president, Joao Goulart, in 1964.

Symbolizing the supposed overcoming of the conflicts of the past, she had 11 of her former prison comrades seated alongside the military command.

Clashing violently with this image of harmony, however, was a statement given to the press just days later by General Jose Elito de Carvalho Siqueira, tapped by Rousseff as the new chief minister of the Cabinet of Institutional Security (GSI), the top national security official. The 1964 coup was

a "historical fact", he said, and the disappearance of political prisoners was "no cause for shame."

Siqueira, who previously commanded UN "peace-keeping" forces in Haiti, voiced his opposition even to the government's proposal for a toothless "truth commission" to clarify the circumstances of the murders, torture and disappearances carried out under the dictatorship and locate the remains of the regime's victims. The government, he said, should "look to the future" and not concern itself with "isolated situations of the past."

While the government reported that Rousseff was angered by the remarks and upbraided Elito Siqueira, there was no question of sacking the general from his powerful post within her government.

The general's remarks were made in large measure in opposition to a speech given by Rousseff's secretary for human rights, Maria do Rosario, which was marked by extreme conciliation toward the military, even referring to its 20 years of rule as an "exceptional period," avoiding the word "dictatorship." She stressed that "the armed forces are part of the democratic consolidation of Brazil" and that her ministry would recognize that "in the Brazil of today and in the state there is no institution against democracy."

Do Rosario has reportedly been instructed to coordinate any efforts toward the creation of a "truth commission" with Brazil's Defense Minister Nelsom Jobim, who was kept at his post at the recommendation of Lula. Jobim, a right-wing defender of the military, has publicly opposed the commission in the past. Now he is indicating he would accept it to the extent that it is effectively controlled by the military itself and excludes any possibility of holding anyone accountable for the dictatorship's crimes or of making public the records of the regime, which remain secret to this day.

This revealing episode at the outset of Dilma Rousseff's presidency only makes clear that the eight years in office of the Workers Party and President Lula da Silva resolved none of the issues remaining from the dictatorship. Rather, it served as a means of covering for and abetting the continuation of the country's rule by a wealthy financial elite and the consolidation of the autonomy and power of the its repressive military forces.



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