

Brazil's Temer government sends military into the prisons

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Following a series of bloody prison riots that have claimed the lives of at least 134 inmates in the first 15 days of this year alone, the right-wing Brazilian government of President Michel Temer has ordered the military to prepare to carry out raids on penitentiaries around the country.

According to the government, the plan will initially see the mobilization of 1,000 troops drawn from the Army, Navy and Air Force, divided into 30 units that will be sent into prisons as requested by state governments. Defense Minister Raul Jungmann indicated that this force could be significantly expanded, drawing from Brazil's 350,000-strong armed forces.

Jungmann said that the armed force would be contributing to "reducing the possibility [of new rebellions] and also to reducing their lethality." He acknowledged that this "contribution" went "beyond their principal task, which is the defense of the country."

Meeting with a group of state governors Wednesday, Temer declared that the armed forces "will be, as well, through their extraordinary operational capacity and even the credibility that they have, a fear factor in relation to those who are in the prisons."

According to the government, the military will be utilized to conduct "sweeps" of prisons in search of weapons, cellphones and drugs. Supposedly, prison personnel and police will first clear the areas to be searched, precluding direct physical confrontations between the troops and the inmates.

Temer's turn to the armed forces comes in the wake of prison uprisings that killed 60 inmates on January 1 and 2 in a prison located in the Amazon river city of Manaus, followed by two more bloody upheavals, one in the northern state of Roraima, where 33 prisoners

lost their lives, and another in the northeastern state of Rio Grande do Norte, where another 26 were killed. Smaller outbreaks at other prisons produced additional deaths.

The government and the corporate media have attributed this bloodletting, which in a number of cases included the beheading of prisoners, to turf wars between rival gangs, principally the PCC (First Command of the Capital), based in Brazil's southeastern city of Sao Paulo, and crime organizations based in the north of the country.

In reality, however, many of those killed were not linked to any gang, but rather were the victims of a brutal and inhuman system of incarceration that reflects the staggering social polarization that is the overriding feature of Brazil's capitalist social order.

With over 622,000 inmates, Brazil has the fourth largest prison population in the world, trailing only the US, China and Russia. This population has increased more than six-fold since 1990, resulting in more and more inmates crammed into decaying prisons.

According to the government's own statistics, the official capacity for prisons nationwide is only 327,000, just over half of the number of inmates who are today being held under abominable conditions in these facilities. The prison complex in Manaus, where the first massacre took place on New Year's Day, held 1,224 men in a space meant for 454.

A major factor in driving up Brazil's prison population was the former Workers Party government's embrace under President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of the "war on drugs," with the implementation of a new drug law in 2006, whose repressive weight fell overwhelmingly on the most impoverished sections of the Brazilian population. The law was only made more draconian under Lula's

successor, the recently impeached PT president Dilma Rousseff.

Meanwhile, with the onset of Brazil's deep-going economic crisis, the Rousseff government and its successor under former vice president Temer slashed funding for the building of new prison facilities by 85 percent over the past two years, according to the daily *Folha de S.Paulo*, while also cutting appropriations for maintaining existing prisons.

For its part, the Brazilian court system operates at glacial speed and with utter contempt for the democratic rights of the working class and the poor. Fully 40 percent of those in jail have yet to be tried or convicted of any crime.

Temer's calling out the troops to confront the crisis in the prison system is part of a broader pattern of a turn to repression and militarization by his government, the most right-wing in Brazil since the fall of the 20-year dictatorship brought to power by the US-backed military coup of 1964.

With 12 million unemployed and the government carrying out the most sweeping attacks on education, health care and working class living standards in decades, the increasing reliance upon the military to confront manifestations of social unrest has ominous implications.

Last month, Gen. Rômulo Bini Pereira, the former chief of staff of the Defense Ministry, wrote a column for *Folha de S.Paulo* stating that under conditions of deepening economic and political crisis, "the country may enter into a situation of ungovernability, which will no longer meet the expectations and desires of society, rendering the existing democratic regime unworkable." In such a situation, he warned, "the Armed Forces may be called upon to intervene, including in defense of the state and [society's] institutions."



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