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Brazil: Courage and political will to deliver human rights

(Sao Paulo) Although progress has been made by the Brazilian authorities by setting out long-term proposals to address human rights, as President Lula's first year in office comes to an end he has to meet the expectation of concrete delivery, said Irene Khan, Amnesty International's Secretary General speaking at the end of her visit to Brazil.

During her visit she met with President Lula to discuss, amongst other things the government's efforts to combat the violence suffered by Brazilians today, such as legislation to control the carrying of arms. The organization recognized the efforts made by the Brazilian government as an important first step in controlling a trade which has contributed to extensive human rights violations around the globe and called on the Brazilian government to be a sponsor of an international Arms Trade Treaty.

Ms Khan added: "President Lula has assured us of his readiness to play a key role in pushing for an international treaty to control arms. We appreciate this important commitment to stop the senseless killing and maiming of more than half a million people per year around the globe."

But Ms Khan cautioned that: "It will not only be through international commitments, but through profound changes in the lives of the poor, the indigenous and the marginalized people in the favelas that human rights will be realised in Brazil."

In visits to the communities of Sapopemba (Sao Paulo) and Borel (Rio de Janeiro), Ms Khan spoke to families of people who had been killed by police and she visited a police station that had recently been attacked. She also met with human rights activists who, because of their work to stand up for the rights of the marginalized, are labelled as "defenders of criminals".

"Entire communities of the poor are being victimized, they are being targeted by the police and they live in constant fear. The poor have become the scapegoats of the problems resulting from long-term social abandonment and the broader failure of the public security policies," Ms Khan added.

While recognising that the government has an obligation to ensure security for all Brazilians, Ms Khan stated: "Brutal and repressive policing has contributed to the spiralling of violence, to the extent that the even police are no longer safe. It is blatantly clear that security can no longer continue to be promoted at the expense of human rights."

"State governments have long been protected from international condemnation and international judicial rulings under the federal system, yet they have a fundamental part to play in reversing the trend of systematic violations and abuse."

Over the last ten months human rights violations and abuses by state officials have continued to rise. According to official figures, police killings in São Paulo rose 31% by September of this year with 664 civilians killed. Similarly in Rio de Janeiro members of the state police forces killed 917 by September, a rise of 36% on last year and more than three times the number killed in 2000. Many of the killings were unlawful and many of the victims were innocent of any crime.

Amnesty International welcomed the government's stated commitment to address chronic violations of economic and social rights, through social programmes.

"Ending economic and social exclusion, especially hunger, is a vital step towards overcoming the vast disparities that are at the heart of most human rights violations in Brazil today," Ms Khan said.

"Hunger and poverty are as significant a threat to the security and rights of all Brazilians as are armed violence and organized crime."

However, Amnesty International urged the Brazilian government to ensure that its social policies embrace a holistic approach to human rights: "one that recognizes that freedom from want and freedom from fear are both inseparable aspects of human security."

In addition, Amnesty International raised the following human rights concerns in Brazil:

- The protection of human rights defenders who increasingly face threats, attacks and even killings, as they continue to fight for the rights of all.
- Attacks and killings of activists fighting for land and indigenous rights. This year over 50 land activists have been killed across the country, with many others being attacked and several being detained under what are widely believed to be politically motivated charges.
- Torture by police and prison officers, which has become endemic.

In a Memorandum addressed to President Lula, Amnesty International called on the Brazilian authorities to:

- Curb the arms trade and proliferation of arms that are the cause of great human rights abuses.
- Ensure the full and urgent implementation of the national plan for the protection of human rights defenders and to urge other governments in the region to develop such plans.
- Ensure comprehensive public security reform proposals, as set out in the *Sistema Único de Segurança Pública* (Single Public Security System, SUSP), incorporate and implement human rights standards and ensure accountability of state officials.

"It is vital that the federal and state governments do not sacrifice human rights measures for short-term political expediency," Ms Khan said.

"President Lula told AI that implementation of human rights is not only a matter of resources but of courage and political will. We now expect him to show this political will."

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