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Brazil: A vote for human rights?

Brazil's upcoming presidential elections offer a unique opportunity for candidates to place human rights firmly at the heart of their political programmes and to design and implement much-needed measures to address the country's critical human right situation, Amnesty International said today.

A delegation from the organization will be visiting the country from 16 to 27 September, ahead of the elections scheduled for October, to hold talks with presidential candidates on what they intend to do to promote and protect the fundamental rights of all Brazilians. Delegates will subsequently travel to the state of Espírito Santo, where human rights defenders continue to face great danger against a backdrop of human rights violations, corruption and organized crime.

"Combating the spiralling crime rates in Brazilian cities features prominently in the candidates' programmes," Amnesty International noted, acknowledging the need for measures to tackle the growing public security crisis.

"However, in the absence of clear human rights guarantees, there is a risk that the 'war on crime' will result in a blank cheque to the security forces to continue applying repressive policing techniques which lead to large scale violations of human rights," the organization added.

In recent years, Amnesty International has continued to document the widespread and systematic use of torture to extract confessions in criminal investigations and as a method to control, punish and humiliate inmates in the country's terminally overcrowded prison system.

Under the mounting pressure of public demands for greater security, members of the Brazilian police forces are increasingly taking the law into their own hands, and unlawful fatal shootings by police are reaching alarmingly high numbers.

"The victims of these abusive policing practices mainly belong to the most vulnerable and marginalised sectors of Brazilian society who find themselves effectively caught up in a no man's land between the violence of organized crime and that of the state response to it," Amnesty International said.

The organization stressed that the ever escalating crime rates prove that brutal policing is not the answer, but rather ends up fuelling the cycle of violence, human rights abuses and insecurity, afflicting Brazilian society.

The rhetoric used by many politicians and public figures on crime and urban violence has also further diminished the already limited space given for public debate on human rights issues. Respect for human rights has wrongly been portrayed as undermining public security rather than reinforcing it.

Those who have struggled to expose and campaign against the violence and impunity which infest the country are often dismissed as '*defensores de bandidos*' and throughout Brazil lawyers, journalists, land activists, indigenous leaders or witnesses brave enough to testify in the face of threats, are ever more often the targets of intimidation, harassment and attacks because of their human rights work.

"All presidential candidates should publicly commit to keeping the space for human rights debate open and to make the protection of these rights a priority," Amnesty International said. "This includes recognizing the legitimacy of the work of human rights defenders, which has become so diminished in the present climate of fear and mistrust over issues of public security."

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