
Brazil: Only Truth Will Put Ghosts of Dictatorship to Rest

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Secrets and lies have failed as the basis upon which Brazil can overcome the violations and pain suffered by so many during the military dictatorship.

Today hundreds, if not thousands of Brazilians, still endure the scars of their losses, unable to mourn their loved ones in peace as they continue to be denied the truth.

The recent incident surrounding the publications of photographs, allegedly of Vladimir Herzog, the journalist tortured and killed by the military government in 1975, exemplifies how the wounds remain unhealed as a result of a prevailing sense of injustice and betrayal.

This has been compounded by the crass and offensive statement made by the armed forces, defending their actions during the regime.

Their subsequent timid retraction fails to redress the hurt and concern caused and only adds to the urgent need for the relatives and public to be informed of the heinous crimes committed by the authorities at that time and for the Brazilian state to ensure that nobody responsible or expressing public support for these crimes continues to work in a public post.

Nearly twenty years after the end of military rule in Brazil, families of those killed or 'disappeared' by the then government are continually denied access to information on the whereabouts of their relatives.

Furthermore, recent information that these photographs are part of a much larger stock of files from the military regime appears to contradict government and military insistence that much of the relevant documentation has been destroyed.

This information must be investigated immediately and transparently to ensure that all existing documents are fully protected from any attempts to destroy them and that families of the victims are given full access to them.

In fact, Amnesty International is extremely concerned at the continued impediments put in place by successive governments, including the present one, to granting public access to the files or other information about human rights violations from that period.

These impediments include: the publication of decree number 4,553 to extend the period of secrecy on government documents; the recent decision by the Advocate General of the Union to appeal the supreme court's ruling which ordered the Union to investigate and present its findings on the 'disappearances' in Araguaia, a region where military forces were engaged in counter-insurgency operations against a small guerrilla force in the early 1970s; and the setting up of an Inter-Ministerial Commission to investigate the locations of the remains of the 'disappeared' from Araguaia with no participation of civil society or families of the victims.

As testified around the world, justice and reconciliation, as well as full reparation, will only result from the truth. Far from "creating the conditions for the construction of a new Brazil, based on peace and security", as expressed in the army's recent press statement, the 1964 regime set a precedent, which is still practiced by security forces today, of torture, repression and impunity.

It is imperative that the government now takes a stance to ensure that all legal and political impediments to informing families of the truth are immediately eradicated, so as to allow the individuals and the country as a whole to properly mourn their past, enjoy the justice so long denied them and overcome the crimes of the present.

Background Information

From 1964 to 1985 Brazil was ruled by a military government. During that time numerous alleged "subversives" were killed, "disappeared" and tortured by state security forces.

Following the end of military rule an amnesty law was passed pardoning all members of the security forces as well as political activists of their crimes.

Since that time the victims and families of victims of the regime have fought for truth, justice and reparation for the human rights violations they suffered.

Though mechanisms have been set up to pay families reparation this process has been slow, while many more continue to be denied access to information as to what happened to their relatives.

This is a public statement by Amnesty International entitled "Brazil: Healing the Scars"