

Journalists Kidnapped and Tortured by Brazil's Police

Contributed by Newsroom
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Paris-based press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is calling for a Brazilian federal commission of enquiry to investigate the kidnap and torture of three employees of Rio's daily newspaper O Dia by paramilitaries.

According to Rio's secretary for Public Safety, José Mariano Beltrame, there were civilian and military policemen involved in the abduction and torture of the journalists and driver of O Dia.

RSF has sent a letter addressed to the Brazilian President, the country's Justice Minister and Rio de Janeiro state's governor:

HE Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, President of Brazil; Mr. Tarso Genro, Minister of Justice; Mr. Sérgio Cabral, Governor of the State of Rio de Janeiro

Dear President Da Silva, Dear Minister and Dear Governor,

You will be aware of the news of the abduction and barbaric mistreatment of three employees of the Rio de Janeiro-based daily O Dia - a reporter, a photographer and a driver - at the hands of a militia operating in a Rio de Janeiro favela on May 14.

Reporters Without Borders is stunned to learn this could have been carried out by members of the security forces who are supposed to combat crime and drug trafficking in sensitive neighborhoods.

The behavior of these militias, formed by policemen, prison officers, firemen and security guards, is no better than the behavior of the criminals they are meant to combat.

This extremely serious case follows other recent physical attacks on the media involving members of the police, especially in the states of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In our view, these cases of abuse of authority require the appointment of a federal commission to investigate and suppress these militias in coordination with the state authorities.

The two O Dia journalists and their driver moved into the Batan favela in Realengo, a western suburb of Rio de Janeiro, at the beginning of May into order to research a story on these militias. According to O Dia, around 10 gunmen

kidnapped the photographer and driver from a café on May 14 and initially tried to get residents to lynch them.

Their abductors then bundled them into a red Polo car with the registration number KPB 4592 and drove off with them. At around 9 pm the same day, they kidnapped the reporter from her home in the favela and drove off with her in the same Polo car. One of the militiamen told her: "You work for O Dia and you have been taken prisoner for 'ideological lies'."

The journalists were stripped for their equipment and material and they and their driver were subjected to barbaric mistreatment for seven hours in a secret prison. They were beaten, plastic bags were put over their heads, they were given electric shocks, they were subjected to Russian roulette and they were threatened with being tortured to death.

Finally, at around 4 am, they were released. They are currently in a safe place where they are receiving medical and psychological treatment. The newspaper did not make the case public until 31 May, in order to facilitate the investigation being carried out by the Rio de Janeiro state public security authorities.

The Rio de Janeiro city journalists' union has called it "one of the most serious attacks on press freedom since the end of the military dictatorship."

The Rio de Janeiro media describe these militias as a relatively new phenomenon. According to O Dia, militias of this kind are currently operating in a total of 78 localities and have been responsible for about 200 murders in the past three years.

Their presence is a direct threat to the state guarantees enshrined in the 1988 federal constitution, and it is for this reason that Reporters Without Borders calls for far-reaching measures to be adopted against them.

We thank you in advance for giving this letter your careful attention.

Sincerely,

Robert Ménard Secretary-General

Reporters Without Borders