

Brazilian Commission Details Murder and Torture by US-backed Dictatorship

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One day after the release of the US Senate Intelligence Committee's report on CIA torture in Washington, the government of Brazil officially unveiled a nearly 2,000-page report detailing the political murders, torture and other crimes carried out during two decades of dictatorship that began with a US-backed military coup in 1964.

The report was prepared by a National Truth Commission set up by President Dilma Rousseff in 2012 and is based on over 1,000 interviews with victims and some of the perpetrators of the dictatorship's crimes as well as a review of official records, including from the country's hospitals and morgues.

In a speech praising the report, Rousseff broke into tears when speaking about "those who lost family members, friends, companions and continue to suffer as if they died again each and every day." The Workers Party (PT) president was herself imprisoned by the dictatorship for three years and subjected to electric shock and other tortures after joining an urban guerrilla group while a student under the military regime.

In the same speech, however, Rousseff declared that just as those who had "fallen in this fight confronting the illegal truculence of the state" were honored, so too, "we recognize and deeply respect the political pacts that have led us to re-democratization."

The remark, which repeated virtually word for word a statement she issued on the 50th anniversary of the 1964 coup, was an unmistakable reference to the 1979 general amnesty imposed in the waning days of the military dictatorship. This law has left Brazil virtually the only country in Latin America not to prosecute any of those responsible for the thousands of political killings and endemic torture that the continent suffered under a series of military juntas.

The National Truth Commission, which named nearly 400 individuals, including ex-presidents, generals, police torturers, diplomats and doctors who collaborated in the torture, included in its recommendations a rather toothless call for those responsible to face criminal prosecution. In presenting the report to Rousseff, Pedro Dallari, the commission's coordinator, stressed that, "It's not the commission's job to determine whether the amnesty law should apply or whether it should be revoked."

Brazil's Supreme Federal Court upheld the military's self-amnesty as constitutional in 2010, while insisting that the statute of limitations would prevent prosecution in any case. Two justices interviewed by *O Globo* insisted that this remained the case and that the court's word was final.

Both the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the United Nations have warned Brazil that it is in violation of international law in failing to prosecute state murders and torture, which are considered international crimes against humanity.

While the content of the report is horrific, and many of the filmed interviews of testimony by surviving torture victims moving, there is not that much new in the report, compared to previous investigations conducted by non-governmental groups, such as Projeto “Brasil: Nunca mais” [“Brazil: Never again” Project] nearly 30 years ago.

Cecilia Coimbra, a former political prisoner who founded the Grupo Tortura Nunca Mais, described herself as “frustrated, revolted and outraged” by the report. “This history is being told in accordance with the interests of the forces that are in power,” she said, calling the document superficial and crafted to “soften the accusations against the military.”

The report correctly insists that political murders and torture were not the acts of individual military or police officers but rather, “Under the military dictatorship, repression and the elimination of political opposition became the policy of the state, conceived and implemented based on decisions by the president of the republic and military ministers.”

The document presents detailed accounts of the deaths or disappearances of 434 individual students, factory workers, leftist politicians, journalists and others, while stressing that these numbers “certainly don’t correspond to the total of deaths and disappearances, but only to cases that it was possible to prove.”

Similarly, it documents numerous torture histories, without giving a precise number of victims. It does cite a previous estimate by the human rights secretary that “around 20,000 Brazilians were subjected to torture during the period of dictatorship.”

“Torture became systematically employed by the Brazilian state after the 1964 coup, whether as a method of collecting information or obtaining confessions (technique of interrogation), or as a means of disseminating fear (strategy of intimidation),” the report states. “It ceased being restricted to the violent methods already employed by the Brazilian police against common criminals, becoming more sophisticated and turning into the essence of the military system of political repression, based on the arguments of the supremacy of national security and the existence of a war against terrorism.”

This “sophistication” was facilitated in large measure by training and advisers provided by Washington. CIA and military intelligence officials were sent to Brazil to participate in this grisly repression, while Brazilian military and police officers were sent to the US Army’s School of the Americas and other institutions for instruction.

While the refusal of the Obama administration to declassify many CIA and Pentagon documents that implicate individuals from former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger on down in the crimes carried out against the Brazilian people, one document cited in the report gives an indication of the intimacy of US involvement.

It is the entry log of the DOPS [Department of Political and Social Order—the dictatorship’s political police] headquarters in Sao Paulo, a main torture center. It includes multiple entries for US officials, including Claris Halliwell, Lincoln Chapin and C. Harlow Duffin. Halliwell, listed as a political attaché (a title frequently used by CIA agents) at the US consulate in Sao Paulo, visited the center 47 times between 1971 and 1974, on a number of occasions

signing in at night and leaving the next morning. Duffin was named by ex-CIA agent Philip Agee as his “desk chief” in Washington.

The same visitor logs show frequent visits to the torture center by leading Sao Paulo business figures, including the representative of the Federation of Industries of the State of Sao Paulo (FIESP), Geraldo Rezende de Matos. He came to the torture center 40 times in the course of just two months in 1971, also at times staying overnight. It is known that business leaders provided financing for the dictatorship’s repression and also fingered militant workers in their factories for abduction, torture and murder. The National Truth Commission’s report has studiously avoided the strong connection between profit interests and military state terror.

In addition to the torture training by US advisers, the British government is also named as a provider of such aid to the dictatorship. It describes one British intelligence innovation, known as the “geladeira” [refrigerator] in which prisoners were placed in a box measuring 1.5 meters wide and 1.5 meters high, making it impossible to either stand or lie down. Insulated from all light and sound, the box had cooling and heating systems capable of inflicting freezing temperatures or intolerable heat. A loudspeaker was used to emit screams and other terrifying noises at an overwhelming volume. Victims were kept in this device for days at a time without food or water.

Other barbaric methods had already been enumerated in previous reports. These include electric shocks to the genitals, inserting insects in body orifices, burning flesh, rape and other forms of sexual violence against both men and women, and procedures known by such names as the “parrot’s perch” and the “dragon’s chair” in which subjects were tortured to the point of death and beyond.

The commission’s report includes a recommendation for the removal of Brazil’s Military Police (PM) from military control. A recent report revealed that Brazilian police kill civilians at the rate of six a day, a level of violence that many connect to the impunity enjoyed by the military killers and torturers of the dictatorship.

Rousseff is not expected to act on this recommendation, any more than she is likely to push for an end to the military amnesty. Having secured re-election in October by the narrowest victory for the PT in a dozen years, her administration has been swamped by a massive corruption scandal at the state-owned oil giant Petrobras. Contractors have charged that they were forced to pay bribes to the PT to secure contracts at the company, whose board Rousseff chaired from 2003 to 2010.

The crisis has emboldened Brazil’s political right, which has called a series of demonstrations raising the demand for Rousseff’s ouster and calling for “military intervention.”

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