

23 September 2019

Statement – Brazil: High-level defamation against human rights defenders in Rio de Janeiro in reprisal for speaking out on police abuse

On 17 and 18 September 2019, a number of police interventions in the favelas Jacaré, Complexo do Alemão, Complexo da Maré and Cidade de Deus resulted in the shutdown of schools and businesses, lack of access to transportation and public health services, widespread terror, and killings. These are only the most recent of a series of often violent interventions which have been accompanied by defamation used against human rights defenders and collectives, such as Papo Reto, that have been working inside the favelas in Rio de Janeiro to document and denounce human rights violations resulting from police and military operations, and to provide assistance to the most affected families.

On 20 September, the military police shot a rifle and killed Agatha Félix, an 8 year-old girl who was inside a van in Fazendinha, part of the Complexo do Alemão. Police officers claimed they were responding to an attack, however, eyewitnesses confirmed that the only bullet was shot by a military police officer. The girl died as a result of the gunshot in a healthcare unit. Human rights defenders and favela residents [protested](#) against her death and the increase of police brutality, while government authorities such as state governor Wilson Witzel, president Bolsonaro and Minister of Justice Sergio Moro largely remain silent. On 22 September, after increasing pressure from civil society, the government of Rio de Janeiro [tweeted its regret](#) for innocent deaths and praised the work of the police.

On 16 August 2019, the Governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro, Wilson Witzel, blamed human rights defenders for the increase in deaths of favela residents during police interventions in a speech. The Governor tried to hold human rights defenders protesting against his policies responsible for an increase in violence, allegedly inciting gang members not to “fear” the state and to commit crimes.

This defamatory speech followed a series of [protests](#) by human rights defenders and favela residents against the [killing of at least six young persons](#) between 9 and 14 August 2019, as consequences of stray bullets during military operations in the communities. Such operations often are carried out with armoured cars and helicopters equipped with shooting platforms – the latter caused the deaths of [14 of the 15 individuals killed](#) in the Complexo da Maré from January until June 2019.

Groups of schoolkids from Complexo da Maré, where killed human rights defender [Marielle Franco](#) was born and raised, sent [1,500 letters to authorities](#) describing their daily lives under militarisation, and asked for the state government to stop using helicopters in operations.

Since the beginning of 2019, defenders in Rio de Janeiro have publicly denounced the human rights violations resulting from police operations. Human rights defender [Rauli Santiago](#), founder of the Collective Papo Reto, [published images](#) of his family trying to find shelter during police operations with helicopters in reaction to the Governor’s defamation campaign. The defender also [stated](#) that “one day of police operations leaves children without classes, elderly persons with their health shaken, the commerce closed, individuals unemployed, all of which jeopardise their psychological well-being. This is also a form of death, but without the need to fire rifles, because no one will “be well” tomorrow”.

Shortly before the Governor's speech, on 12 August, the report [Direito à Segurança Pública da Maré](#) (Maré's Right to Public Security) was published, drawing attention to the rise in human rights violations directly caused by military interventions in the Complexo da Maré. The number of people killed during these operations more than doubled in 2019, compared to the previous year, as well as the number of days when students were left without classes due to school shutdowns.

On 19 June 2019, a judicial decision that safeguarded the rights of the Complexo da Maré residents was annulled. Since June 2017, the residents of Maré were granted harm reduction policies put in place by the judicial decision resulting from an *Ação Civil Pública* (collective lawsuit). It included popular consultations, video and audio cameras in police vehicles, the availability of ambulances during operations, and the execution of warrants solely during the day. Despite the lack of full compliance with these measures, the number of killings and school shutdowns [registered](#) by human rights organisations diminished after the "ACP" - from 47, in 2017, to 24 in 2018.

The debate around police brutality and the violation of human rights of favela residents has routinely included defamatory statements against those who speak out by authorities in Rio de Janeiro. Since the government of Wilson Witzel took office, there has been an increase in the use of defamation against human rights defenders in retaliation for denouncing state violence. According to Luciano Bandeira, president of the Rio de Janeiro section of the Brazilian Bar Association (OAB-RJ), the Governor's speech is an attempt to transfer the responsibility for deaths resulting from state actions to human rights defenders.

The Governor's actions are particularly concerning given that they appear to legitimise police violence in Rio de Janeiro, where security forces already [killed more than 194 individuals from January to June 2019](#), according to the *Instituto de Segurança Pública* – ISP (Public Security Institute).

Front Line Defenders urges state authorities to publicly recognise the positive and legitimate role of human rights defenders in a democratic society and ensure that public officials refrain from engaging in stigmatisation, smear campaigns, and hate speech against human rights defenders, and publicly apologise when they do so. Front Line Defenders calls on authorities in Brazil to condemn the smear campaigns against human rights defenders who denounce police brutality in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, and asks national and state level authorities to take immediate measures to ensure their protection.