



Afro-Brazilians and indigenous groups face serious bias, says UN rights chief



High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay (second right) being welcomed by a dancer to an Afro-Brazilian community

13 November 2009 – While Brazil has an “impressive” set of laws and policies to promote human rights and improve socio-economic well-being, indigenous groups and Afro-Brazilians face serious discrimination, injustice and violence, the United Nations human rights chief said today.

Wrapping up her week-long visit to the South American nation, High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay **noted** that millions of Afro-Brazilians and indigenous people are “mired in poverty” and lack access to basic services and employment opportunities.

“Until that changes, it will hamper Brazil’s progress on many other fronts,” she told a news conference before departing the country, urging officials to focus on fully implementing existing laws, plans and policies to address discrimination.

She lauded the country’s Constitution and legal framework, saying they “form an impressive foundation of human rights protection,” and noted a number of important measures taken by the Government, including this week’s passing by the Congress of a constitutional amendment designed to provide free universal education to children aged 4 to 17.

“Many of Brazil’s biggest problems are rooted in poverty and discrimination, and a truly universal secondary education system is essential if there is to be major improvement in these areas,” she said.

At the same time, she noted a number of issues of concern, including the situation of the country’s indigenous people. The fact that she had not seen a single indigenous person among all the many officials she had met during the visit was “very indicative of their continued marginalization,” she stated.

Ms. Pillay stated that, for the most part, Brazil's indigenous people "are not benefiting from the country's impressive economic progress, and are being held back by discrimination and indifference, chased out of their lands and into forced labour."

In addition, there are very few Afro-Brazilians in positions of authority, and this was particularly striking in the country's northern Bahia state, "where three-quarters of the population are Afro-Brazilian, but hardly any of the top administrators."

Turning to the issue of violence, the High Commissioner acknowledged that Brazil's police had a tough task in trying to maintain law and order. She said the Government needs to establish a clear policy to combat impunity, adding that all allegations of rights violations need to be promptly and thoroughly investigated by independent authorities. Perpetrators must be prosecuted, irrespective of whether they are gangsters or policemen, she added.

"The astonishingly high rate of homicides in Brazil's overcrowded prisons, and allegations of widespread torture and inhumane conditions are alarming and unacceptable," she said. "Equally disturbing is the fact that the vast majority of those incarcerated are Afro-Brazilians.

She also pointed to the "very high levels of violence directed at Brazilian women," and said she hoped more could be done "to help women all across the country make use of the laws and projects designed to protect them."

Ms. Pillay, who met with President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and several ministers and officials, **noted** that Brazil is "the only country in South America not to have taken action to confront abuses committed during the period of military rule." There are ways of dealing with this "which avoid reopening the wounds of the past and help to heal them instead," she said.

"Torture, however, is an exception," she said. "International law is unequivocal: torture is a crime against humanity and cannot be left unpunished. The fact that the torture that took place in the military era has still not been dealt with by Brazil means that the proper, clear disincentives to commit torture now and in the future are not in place."

While in Brazil, the High Commissioner also attended the annual national conference on human rights defenders and met with a wide range of civil society representatives in three cities –Salvador, Rio de Janeiro and, the capital, Brasilia.

She also visited an isolated community of Afro-Brazilian descendants of slaves in Bahia state, and one of Rio de Janeiro's poverty-stricken favelas.

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