

Repression and Terror

The Price of "Progress" in Brazil

WILLIAM L. WIPFLER

"TERROR AND Torture in Brazil" is the brief and dramatic title of a dossier that has been submitted to the Vatican by a group of 61 Belgians, Frenchmen and Italians. In sharp, brutal detail it sketches the portrait of a military dictatorship that has initiated a systematic and inhumane process of repression in the name of progress. The dossier contains 11 statements that testify to the torture and murder of so-called "political" prisoners, but these represent only a small percentage of the documentation that is now available from Brazil, smuggled out with great danger to those involved in its preparation.

The present tragedy is the latest stage in a gradual shift toward fascism that was initiated by a military coup in March, 1964. For four-and-a-half years the generals and colonels manipulated the political scene. In 1966 three different elections were arranged so that the Government could increase its power through a pseudo-democratic process. Opposition was driven out of the political arena, and only "candidates" approved by the Government could be assured of election. Congress became a virtual rubber stamp with only a few courageous voices of opposition raised in its sessions. Finally in December, 1968, the last façade of democracy was removed with the closing of Congress and the granting of total power to the President-General.

What has been accomplished by the military during its six years in power? An article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "Military 'Hard-Liners' are Expected to Block Revival of Democracy," (Dec. 31, 1969) offered a succinct evaluation.

Brazil, a nation that has prided itself on personal freedom and libertarian traditions, is living under a dictatorship. The military's

"revolution" didn't begin that way, however. . . . Their takeover, it is implied, was a necessary and temporary intervention for the good of the nation. But after five-and-a-half years of military government, the pledges to step aside look increasingly hollow to analysts here. . . . The military government . . . has done much to curb inflation (1964 rate: 85 percent; expected 1969 figure: 23 percent), stimulate economic growth and lure foreign investment, but despite such progress there remains abundant misery among Brazil's 90 million citizens.

Brazil has enormous natural resources, but the per capita income hovers around \$350, and many millions live outside the money economy altogether. Real income has been falling. Less than half the population is literate. Health, education, sanitation and other vital services are sadly inadequate in most parts of the country. The government could not be called popular.

In short, the price for "stability" and "progress" is becoming exceedingly high for most Brazilians.

The rights and liberties of Brazilian citizens have been radically curtailed during the past 14 months by a series of National Security Laws promulgated by decree. One of these, Institutional Act Five, suspended habeas corpus, ended civilian participation in government, severely limited freedom of the press, and effectively muzzled dissent.

In order to control opposition, hundreds of prominent citizens, including a past-President, 94 congressmen, several state governors, dozens of minor officials and journalists were deprived of their political rights for ten years. Seventy professors were dismissed from the Universities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro without explanation. Hundreds of students were expelled from the universities for three to five years, and others were sent to prison by military tribunals. (Ed. Note: Readers may recall an earlier discussion of such acts by Richard Shaull in "Repression, Brazilian Style" in our July 21, 1969 issue.)

WILLIAM L. WIPFLER, who became acquainted at first hand with the problems of torture while serving as an Episcopal missionary in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo era, is Assistant Director of the Latin America Department of the National Council of Churches. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first full-length article documenting torture in Brazil to appear in this country.

March 16, 1970

Christianity and Crisis

Facts for All, . . . But the US

Repression and terror have increased substantially. Untold numbers of persons have fallen victim to the arbitrary violence exercised by the police and military. Stories of mass arrests and the inhumane treatment of the opponents of the Government have filtered out of Brazil for about a year. And then, through one of those strange inconsistencies that appear even under the most efficient of repressive mechanisms, the facts came into the open. During the first ten days of December, 1969, the Brazilian press bombarded the public with reports of the torture and abuse of political prisoners. Many of these same prisoners gained new courage and signed detailed affidavits revealing the indignities and suffering they had undergone.

Brazil was shocked. Prominent citizens called for a serious investigation. The President-General vowed to look into the matter personally. And then suddenly there was a new silence. Reports and commentary on arrests and the treatment of political prisoners were prohibited unless provided by the Government. These were considered "national security" matters; laws covering them included:

Article 16. It is a crime to publish by any means of social communication news that is false, tendentious or that contains distortions which turn the people against the constituted authorities. Punishment shall be detention of from six months to two years.

When such publication would provoke public disturbances or would endanger the image, authority, trust or prestige of Brazil, the punishment shall be detention of from two to five years.

Article 34. Slander, because of political bias or nonconformism, of the character of someone who exercises a position of authority shall result in a punishment of solitary confinement of from two to four years.

If this crime is committed through the press, radio, or television the punishment shall be increased by half.

The threat was too grave. The media capitulated.

Since December the documentation of specific cases of torture has been finding its way out of Brazil in increasing quantity. Included in this are a number of the declarations signed by victims during the brief period of hope. In Europe, especially in France, Germany and England, the situation has been widely publicized and commented upon in both the religious and secular media.

A lengthy article in *Der Spiegel* (December 15) caused widespread dismay in West Germany because of the echoes of its own Gestapo nightmare. The full text of the dossier sent to the Vatican was

published in the January issue of the French magazine *Croissance*. Numerous articles and editorials have appeared condemning the Government of Brazil and calling on responsible leaders to take action against it similar to that taken by the European community against Greece.

With few exceptions, however, this has not been the case of the media in the United States. When the subject has not been ignored altogether, articles in most of the major newspapers and periodicals here leave the impression that the use of torture



has been limited to application against "terrorists" and "Communists," or has been only a sporadic occurrence in a particular area.

Increasing evidence shows, nevertheless, that torture is widely and indiscriminately used against those who are apprehended in alleged anti-Government activities, against members of their families who are tortured in order to weaken the prisoner, against persons who may have associated with the suspected individuals, or against those who are themselves only suspected of being critical of the Government. Furthermore, the reports now available show that many of the methods of torture are identical throughout the entire country and must be attributed to official activity rather than the whim of an over-zealous interrogator.

The 16 at Ilha das Flores

Many tortures will never be reported. Some of the victims are dead or insane, large numbers are still imprisoned, and many who are out of jail fear the repetition of their experience and will not testify. Others, however, are ready to take the risk of denouncing the atrocities committed against them or that they have witnessed in the hope that public and international pressure will bring these inhumane acts to an end. The concluding paragraph of a statement signed by 16 women at Ilha das Flores, a prison in the Rio de Janeiro harbor, is typical of this courageous stance:

We know that our present attitude denouncing tortures, can spark reprisals against us. We

fear, for it would not be the first case of the simulation of an escape or a suicide to try to hide the truth we are now stating. We call the attention of all those interested in finding out the truth and in punishing the guilty to the fact that we are at the mercy of all types of violence, and need now, more than ever, the decisive help of all.

They had prepared their declaration, they said, "at a moment when the Brazilian public begins to be informed about the atrocities committed against political prisoners in our country and still may doubt that these crimes are really happening." Each of the 16 had been tortured. The following details are taken from their report:

Zilea Resnik, 22, arrested on June 5, 1969, accused of belonging to the MR8, a revolutionary organization. She was kept incommunicado for 45 days during which time she was frequently beaten.

Resane Resnik, 20, Zilea's sister, arrested on the same charges on July 27, 1969. Stripped naked by her torturers, she was beaten and suffered electric shocks on various parts of the body, including the nipples of her breasts.

Ina de Souza Medeiros, 20, arrested on the same charges in Curitiba, Parana, on July 6, 1969. In Curitiba she was forced to witness the tortures inflicted upon one of her friends, Milton Gaia Leite, who was hung naked from a pole while a radio transmitted, at its loudest, a mass, in order to cover up his cries. At the jail of the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS, the political police) she was informed that her husband, Marco Antonio Faria Medeiros, arrested two months before, had died. She panicked, but this information was later proven false. Brought to Ilha das Flores prison, she was beaten, received electric shocks and threatened with sexual assault.

Marijane Vieira Lisboa, 22, arrested in Rio de Janeiro on Sept. 2, 1969, accused of being a member of the Açaô Popular movement. She was made to strip, was beaten and given electric shocks that ended only when she lost consciousness due to heart failure.

Marcia Savaget Fiani, 24, arrested in Rio on the same day on the same charges as the preceding woman. She was made to strip and was beaten. The electric shocks administered to her were made more intense by water previously thrown on her body. The shocks caused a partial paralysis of her right hand. She was kept incommunicado for 14 days.

Maria Elodia Alencar, 38, arrested in Rio on Oct. 30, 1969, was beaten and suffered electric shocks. She was tortured by strangling and was forced to sign her will under torture. Her torturers persistently threatened to arrest and torture her 15-year-old son.

Dorma Tereza de Oliveira, 25, arrested in Rio, Oct. 30, 1969, suffered the customary beatings and electric shocks, as well as strangling, drowning and wounds on her breasts produced by pincers. Needles were thrust under her finger nails.

No further information is available regarding the treatment of the 16 since the time their declaration was made public.

Victims of these atrocities come from every strata of society and from all walks of life. In a single letter written by a lawyer who had suffered 15 days of solitary confinement for defending a political prisoner, the following cases were cited:

Mrs. Ana Vilma, wife of another prisoner named Pena Fiel, was subjected to severe torture that affected her uterus in particular; she needed medical attention. Her husband was also tortured.

All priests arrested in this prison were hung by their feet, completely naked, beaten and given electric shocks. Father Augustine challenged the torturers during the punishment, invoking Christ's example.

In cell number one, next door to mine, a young lady was ill. Her name was Vera, and she was bruised from head to foot. I was told that her husband was in worse condition. Their crime was that they knew a person wanted by the political police. They were set free on a Monday but until Tuesday of the following week they required medical attention in order to recover sufficiently to travel. One of the torturers said that "beating is all right, but one must know how to do it."

A young student also arrived at the place where I was. He was a physics student who had been expelled by his university on the charge of subversion. I saw him after his first interrogation, and he had been beaten so badly that his feet were so swollen that he could not walk. He was sent to the Clinical Hospital where he declared that his wounds were caused by torture. The torturers had broken bones in his hands and feet.

The prisoner in cell number four, named Sebastiana, suffered a mental disturbance because of the tortures, and no medical treatment was given to her.

In another letter written by a 56-year-old taxi driver, Severino B. Silva, there is a description of the treatment he received in the military village of Rio. He was tortured by starvation. His toenails were pulled out and razor blades were forced under his fingernails. After being beaten, he went through a simulated hanging. He still awaits trial after 11 months of imprisonment on a charge of suspicion.

The Forms of Torture

The declarations and reports are from all parts of Brazil. Almost every document verifies that commissioned officers of the police or military are in charge of interrogations. The torture is generally carried out at the DOPS headquarters or of one of the intelligence services (Army, Navy or Air Force), or in prison. The methods of torture follow a pattern.

Beatings: Usually inflicted at the beginning and during interrogation. Blows are given with clubs, metal bars, fists and feet. The face, ears, stomach, breasts and genitals are the most frequent targets of the beatings.

"Pau-de-Arara" (Arara Pole): Hands and feet are tied together and a pole inserted between them. The ends of the pole are then supported on a table with the victim hung face down. He is often left in this position for several hours while submitted to other tortures. In some documents it is reported that alcohol fires are lighted on the floor below the victims face. Some individuals have been incapacitated for long periods after this torture because of the traumas to their legs, arms and backs.

Electric shocks: Current is generated by a field telephone or taken directly from wall sockets. Shocks are delivered to the hands, feet, tongue, ears, breasts and genitals. The victim is often soaked with water in order to increase the effect of the shock. The current is frequently increased so as to cause the entire body to become rigid or be contorted by muscular spasms.

The Telephone: Sharp blows with the flat hand are delivered simultaneously to both ears. This causes a loss of balance, impairment of hearing, as well as severe pain.

Sexual abuse: In most cases the documents declare that the prisoners are stripped of their clothes at the initiation of the interrogation. Humiliation is an obvious element in the psychological aspect of the torture. The genitals of both men and women receive considerable attention in beatings and the administration of electric shocks. Women prisoners are often violated by torturers or are turned over to police or soldiers of lower rank for their amusement. Male prisoners are sometimes forced to witness the sexual abuse of their wives, children or fiancées.

Simulated execution: Prisoners have been taken from sessions of torture or awakened during a brief respite and brought before a firing squad armed with blanks or empty rifles. Others have been drowned in buckets of water and then revived. And

still others have been hung and then cut down after losing consciousness.

This list is not a complete catalog of all of the tortures described in the available documentation. It is, however, a compilation of those mentioned most frequently by the victims.

As might be expected under such circumstances, increasing numbers of Brazilians are leaving their homeland to seek refuge in other countries. Many



of them are faced with almost insurmountable difficulties: improper or incomplete travel documents, insufficient financial resources, hostile military regimes in several of the nearest countries. (The best estimates available at this time are about 500 in Chile, 1300-1500 in Uruguay and approximately 2,000 in Paris, many of whom are students uncertain that they can safely return to Brazil. Large numbers are in other countries, including the US, but the figures are unavailable since many of them fear to declare themselves refugees.) Although the exodus grows each day and the potential for future refugees is tremendous, international refugee organizations have done little to respond to the needs of the victims of this new situation.

Massive efforts, not unlike those made on behalf of the Jews and others from Europe and Cubans in the early 1960's may now have to be made on behalf of Brazilians. The first steps of such a response is now being organized by a group of individuals from the religious, academic, professional and artistic fields in New York City. (For information, write: The Editor, CHRISTIANITY AND CRISIS.)

How the US Fits In

All of this information and documentation of torture and repression becomes even more disturbing when the extent of continuing US Government and business involvement in Brazil is recognized. Very little open criticism has been forthcoming from these two institutions regarding the course of events of the past six years and particularly of recent months.

When the coup occurred in 1964 Ambassador Lincoln Gordon received it with open satisfaction. He said it was "perhaps as significant to the defense of the Free World as the Sino-Soviet split and the success of the Marshall Plan." Through his influence Washington recognized the military regime within 24 hours.

Significantly, the Agency for International Development increased its expenditures in Brazil from \$15.1 million in 1964 to \$122.1 million in 1965. It has proposed a \$187 million program for 1970. In addition, the US military has maintained the largest of its Latin American missions in Brazil, with over 100 advisers on the staff. The Military Assistance Program provided \$24.9 million in 1967 and \$19.4 million in 1968. Between 1964 and 1968 2,255 military men passed through its training program.

The one brief (four-month) interruption in US support occurred after the closing the Congress in 1968. Some observers believe that aid and assistance were restored quickly because of the inconvenience caused to US business and banks by the suspension. US investment there accounts for \$1,326 million of the \$7,314 million invested in all of South America.

This article is not intended to be sensational. Its purpose is, rather, to awaken American Christians and public opinion to this horrendous terror and

inhumanity. The authorities of Brazil are concerned about their image abroad, and especially in the United States, from which they receive massive foreign aid and investment capital. International outcries may not bring democracy back to Brazil, but it may force the Government to restrict its present policies in the treatment of political prisoners.

Regardless of what its impact in Brazil may be, we must not—cannot—any longer allow our Government and business to quietly support a type of government that we—and prior to certain recent erosions of our own civilization in the past at least—have regarded as contrary to our way of life. What Brazil does is ultimately her own problem; what we do to support, and thereby encourage, her dehumanizing policy of repression is our problem. Brazil—a nation that has made significant contributions to international culture—may be losing the respect of the nations of the world, but we can only wonder how much greater is her loss than ours.

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REPRESSION BRAZILIAN STYLE

IN BRAZIL, unlike the rest of Latin America, Nelson Rockefeller was well received during his recent journeys. His visit was not interrupted by student demonstrations or other acts of protest; no word of criticism was heard on the radio, or in the press.

Yet we should take everything but comfort from his reception in Brazil. It was possible only because the military government has been systematically repressing all political opposition in recent months. Wherever Rockefeller went, massive military and police protection was provided; any negative comments about his visit, as well as any reporting of hostility that might have occurred elsewhere, were prohibited.

This event highlights both the political crisis in Brazil and the dilemma our government faces in its policy toward Latin America.

Last December, in the face of mounting pressures for change among many segments of the population, the military closed Congress, took away the political rights of a large number of the political leaders still around, and created a general climate of insecurity and fear through indiscriminate arrests and the threat of loss of employment for those who might seem potentially subversive.

In April, 72 university professors in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo were dismissed by government decree. Some of them had international reputations and were among the most outstanding scholars in their fields in Brazil. Many of them had no direct political involvements. They now have no opportunity to teach in a Brazilian university; in fact, it will be very difficult for them to find other work. Yet, in a number of instances, they have been denied permission to leave the country to seek employment elsewhere.

Perhaps the best indication of the present state of affairs is a recent order sent by the Ministry of Justice to all editors of newspapers and owners of television stations. It consists of a long list of items about which no news or editorial comment will be permitted. Among them:

No news about, comment upon or interviews with anyone who has had his political rights taken away;

No reporting about student movements which have been dissolved by the government, nor about student political activity;

No criticism of government action taking away political rights of citizens or dismissing them from their employment;

No publication of anything that might create hostility toward government officials;

No criticism of the economic policy of the government;

No news about political arrests, except when provided by the government;

No news about the political activity of the clergy, no manifestos of church leaders or interviews with them that might create tensions "of a religious nature."

No news about workers' movements, strikes or other acts considered subversive which may occur in Brazil or in foreign countries.

Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that an increasing number of people find themselves in a situation of complete insecurity and that a climate of fear and desperation is becoming more and more widespread. A young priest in Recife, adviser for youth affairs of Bishop Helder Camara, was assassinated a few weeks ago. His body was found hanging from a tree on the university campus. Shortly thereafter, an attempt was made to kidnap the president of the Union of Students of the State of Pernambuco. When he tried to escape, he was shot and badly wounded. The number of political prisoners, although unknown, is estimated to be between 2,000 and 5,000.

There is of course another side of the ledger. The government program of economic development has been relatively successful, and the destruction of the corrupt and ineffective old political order is not regretted. But this economic progress has thus far not meant any significant disruption of the old order of economic privilege, and it has occurred by means of increasing dependence upon the US. The military who destroyed the old political order is incapable of creating a new one. Those who have the knowledge, energy and creativity for that task are committed to working for major social and economic reform and the participation of the dispossessed masses in the life of the nation. They are also the people the military feels it must destroy or neutralize to remain in power.

It would be unwise for us to become too critical of the Brazilian military. We in the US have helped to get them where they are and now support them. And in our own policy for Latin America, we are caught in the same trap. We cannot hope to extricate ourselves until we are able to call into question the basic assumptions of our present economic and political relationships, understand the deepest longings and hopes of the younger generation and of the dispossessed and discover how to support rather than block their struggle. To do that may well mean that we will have to be as concerned about changing the structure of our society as they are of theirs.

RICHARD SHAULL