

THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN BRAZIL

ISSUE

The Brazilian Constitution protects basic human rights and fundamental freedoms. However, severe socio-economic inequalities have resulted in human rights abuses against Brazil's most vulnerable groups: street children, indigenous people, and inhabitants of rural communities. Police have been at times implicated in human rights incidents. Canada will continue to monitor closely the situation and provide assistance to social development projects targeted at the underprivileged groups of Brazilian society.

BACKGROUND

Brazil's emergence as a democracy in 1985 followed over twenty years of military dictatorship. The election of President Collor in 1989 engendered a period of democratic euphoria and dramatic economic reform which began to open Brazil to the world to a degree previously impossible. The optimism of the early Collor years was, however, short-lived. Caught up in a web of corruption, Collor was forced to resign to avoid impeachment by Congress. (In December 1994 the Supreme Court, for want of first-hand evidence of his personal involvement, absolved him of criminal charges. His co-accused were convicted.) Having weathered a presidential impeachment process, the new Brazilian democracy was subsequently assaulted by another massive corruption scandal involving dozens of parliamentarians. If the revelation of the depth of political corruption was depressing, the manner in which the political system dealt with it was encouraging. Everything was investigated and pursued according to the best democratic traditions. The new President, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, has a history of involvement in human rights issues.

Whilst the Brazilian economy has begun to stabilize over the last six months, severe socio-economic inequalities, lingering economic uncertainty and endemic corruption have put pressure on Brazilian society which has led to violence against Brazil's most vulnerable groups. Street children are in danger from death squads which are alleged to receive funds from private groups/individuals wishing to rid Brazil's streets of their presence. The police have been implicated in the death squads. Rural violence between landowners and landless peasants continues. Brazil's indigenous peoples are the victims of violence and disease brought by wild-cat gold prospectors trespassing on native territory.

The Brazilian Government has made some efforts to address these abuses (in 1993, 28 policemen were charged for their part in a violent attack on a Brazilian shanty town). The army recently led a campaign to rid Rio's shanty towns of drug-related violence and crime. The presence of the military was welcomed by a citizenry fed up with urban violence (there were 5000 murders in Rio in 1994); human rights groups made little protest at the prospect of soldiers in the streets.