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Brazil's Big House

VISITS TO CARANDIRU PRISON, AND
THE CAMPAIGN TO SHUT IT DOWN

Once, when I was arguing with my Brazilian hostess about the destruction of the Amazon, she snapped, "You have no idea how big this country is!" That's Brazil: big—*grande*—grand in size and gesture. So when, in December of 2002, the São Paulo authorities shut down Latin America's largest and most infamous jail, they didn't just close it. They blew it up.

The maximum security House of Detention at Carandiru in São Paulo embodied everything that is wrong with the Brazilian penal system. It was a walled city, built to house 3,250 prisoners, which at its most crowded held around 8,000. Out of the House of Detention came stories of overcrowding, filth, disease, drug dealing, riot, escape, torture and murder. But it was notorious for another big number: 111, the official number of prisoners killed by military police during a 1992 riot; the number that the man who supervised the police operation, Colonel Ubiratan Guimarães, subsequently chose for his election ticket when he stood as a candidate for state deputy.

My first visit to Carandiru was in 1999, at the start of a countrywide examination of the crisis-ridden penal system on behalf of a human rights organization. The complex was a microcosm of the system—the same litany of horrors sounded from jails and police lock-ups all over the country, accompanied by weekly reports of riots.

Brazil's cities suffer very high levels of violent crime. Brazil is regularly placed in the top five countries for gun-related homicide. Politicians are keen to show



themselves to be tough on criminals, and their public pronouncements echo the popular phrase: *bandido bom é bandido morto* (the only good criminal is a dead criminal). This is more than rhetoric. Brazil may not officially have the death penalty, but fatal police shootings in high numbers—over 700 in São Paulo alone in 2002—dispatch criminal suspects without the inconvenience of the criminal justice system. Not surprisingly, there is little public sympathy for the poor, black, illiterate young men that make up the majority of detainees.

Our guide to the São Paulo prison system was Father Robert Reardon, a Roman Catholic missionary known to friends and enemies alike as Padre Chico. He was a long-standing contact and was delighted that we were preparing an international campaign addressing detention conditions in Brazil. The Bra-

zilian Roman Catholic Church assigns priests and volunteers to ministries for land, children and prisons, and there is a strong tradition of radical priesthood in Brazil, the birthplace of liberation theology. Chico spent most of his life fighting for some small shred of dignity for the prisoners in his pastoral care. He was a wiry Irish-American who spoke both English and Portuguese, usually intertwined with a strong Boston accent. He had little patience for political correctness. He referred to my colleague and me as “girls,” mentally ill prisoners as “nutters,” and used to email us terrible jokes about blonde nuns.

The 1992 Carandiru massacre affected Chico deeply. The riot police had brooked no negotiation with rioters, sidelined the prison governor and entered with identification tags removed shouting, “*Chegou a morte!*” (“Death has arrived!”). Prisoners who had stripped naked, the sign of surrender during riots, were forced to carry bodies and subsequently shot. The massacre was a turning point. Chico’s activism began to take precedence over the business of tak-

ABOVE Scenes from Carandiru Prison, Brazil.

Art by Niils d’Aulaire.

ing soap and prayers to prisoners. He was spurred to collate information about human rights violations. He networked and lobbied at home and abroad. He was not alone in his campaigning, but it was thanks to his vision and energy that prison conditions became a key issue on the Brazilian human rights agenda. He was a point of reference for us throughout the two years we spent researching our report.

The first port of call during any prison visit was the prison governor's office, where the secretary would bring *cafezinho* (strong black coffee in tiny cups, thick with sugar) and glasses of water. Normally, governors blame everything on the guards, then spew packs of lies about reform. But in Carandiru the governor was

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always straightforward. He shrugged his shoulders, waved his hand across the aerial photo of the vast complex and admitted that he had little control over what went on in there. On these occasions Chico sat seemingly relaxed, though every fibre in his body was tense. Chico had that essential quality that made for an effective and charismatic activist: nothing he experienced ever dulled his sense of outrage. Then the governor told us that as far as he was concerned we had full access and cooperation, knowing that it would be the guards in the individual pavilions who would decide just how much or how little access and cooperation we would experience.

Stepping into Carandiru's administration hall for the first time was like stepping back in time. Manual typewriters clacked away, filling out forms while prisoners came and went, and someone kept track of numbers in chalked figures on a huge blackboard. New prisoners leaned against the bars of a huge cage while the administration worked out where to put them. The next impression was the smell, which I soon came to recognize as belonging to all Brazilian prisons. Its base note was like a dilapidated steam bath mixed with public building disinfectant and rust, and it pervaded even the yards, which were open to the sky. The surrounding buildings and the concrete underfoot gently flaked, split and leaked, providing countless cracks through which the smell wafted.

Even in brand-new prisons there is a sense of decay. They tend to be badly built to begin with and then left to rot. (A prison is the perfect building contract: lots of public money to divert, hardly anyone caring about the final result.) During riots, prisoners punch holes through the walls, and newspaper images often show

the men gesticulating through the gaps. Carandiru's shoddy construction—and a few appropriate bribes—permitted a hidden warren through which hundreds of prisoners escaped. In 2001 alone, the administration discovered thirty tunnels around the complex.

There was something almost awe-inspiring about the House of Detention pavilions. A huge amount of activity took place in each yard. Hundreds of men, to-ing and fro-ing, apparently purposeful, engaged with the business of prison life: having forms stamped, going to religious meetings, forming rap groups. Surrounding the yard on all sides stood the cellblocks—five stories of damp-stained walls with rows and rows of barred windows. Out of each window, shoes, clothes, plastic buckets and cooking pots hung or were wedged between the bars; between cells dangled communication lines constructed from string. Arms and legs emerged where prisoners tried to expose their skin to the sun.

Trailing about three yards behind us was our minder, one of the guards. The first one of these I encountered displayed such palpable hatred and fear of Chico that there was no doubt that he would kill him given the opportunity. "That one looks murderous," I said. "Oh, he is," said Chico. I asked the guard if he'd ever been taken hostage. "Yes," he said, ending the conversation. But the guards were not always hostile. On rare occasions they would approach and slip us pieces of paper with denunciations on them—especially when the military police had been trigger-happy. A couple of times their union representatives sought us out in our hotel. Mostly, they were bewildered. They found themselves in an impossible and dangerous job, and were always the first to be blamed for the system's shortcomings.

Guards wear jeans, which distinguish them from the prisoners, who wear shorts. When there is a riot and the military police start shooting, the guards point to their jeans. This doesn't always work. Every so often one of them is shot. They are vastly outnumbered by the prisoners, have little useful training and suffer disproportionately from alcoholism. They are also the means by which much of the prison drug trade takes place. They do not carry guns—something that they often complain about—not only because they are

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concerned about themselves inside (where they are occasionally taken hostage) but also because outside, in their own communities, they fear released prisoners. When they feel threatened or vengeful, they arm themselves with heavy sticks, usually wood, sometimes metal. On these they write things like ‘human rights’ and ‘Padre Chico’ to remind the prisoners being beaten that all hope is misplaced. The prisoners are all

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armed too, of course, with implements made of metal and shards of glass.

In the pavilion yards in Carandiru, the prisoners largely ignored us. They were used to prison tourists—religious groups, politicians, journalists, human rights activists. But in some prisons in the more far-flung corners of the country, we were a curiosity, and inmates gathered around to ask questions or invited us to take a seat in their cells and offer us lukewarm coffee. The first question every prisoner asks, from one end of Brazil to the other, is, “Are you a lawyer?” By law, prisoners should be moved to lower security prisons on completion of a portion of their sentence, and can also earn remission through work—at least in theory. Every prisoner dreams of access to a lawyer because not one prisoner knows how much longer he will be there. The cruelty of the system is exacerbated by the torture of uncertainty.

“No,” we always said, “*dos direitos humanos*” (human rights). “Aah,” they would respond, politely disguising their disappointment. In João Pessoa, crowded under the baking northeastern sun, one small, agitated young man who appointed himself spokesman for a group of about 50 prisoners asked, “So what are you doing here? What can you do for *me*?” “For you, individually? Nothing,” I had to admit. But who knew—with our lobbying, perhaps things would improve five, ten years down the line for future prisoners. He thought about it, softened, and said with utmost kindness, “Senhora, I think what you’re trying to do is impossible. This is not a nice job for you. You should get another one.”

Chico, a smoker himself, always carried a full pack of cigarettes as a means of making contact. In the isolation wings, as he leaned up against the metal doors, the pack would come out of his shirt pocket and he would hand a cigarette or two through the *chapa*, the 15 by 30 centimeter window that is the isolated prisoner’s only contact with the outside world. This was the central focus of any visit: the isolation and

punishment wings, where prisoners are particularly vulnerable, and suspicious-looking doors are kept locked. “Oh, that’s just a storage room. I don’t have the key,” our minders would say.

In Carandiru they called the isolated prisoners the *amarelos* because yellow was the color their skin turned after a few weeks deprived of sunlight. In the prison economy new detainees pay fellow inmates and guards for a space in a cell. The *amarelos* were those that could not afford it, or those that could not be held apart safely from their enemies. Their wing was a long dark corridor, barely lit by windows at both ends and, when it rained, swimming in water and sewage. Each cell was approximately two by three meters and held a minimum of four men, and sometimes as many as eleven. In the corner was a hole in the ground in which the men relieved themselves. In one of the cells, the men had constructed an upside down bucket to cover the hole. When I asked about vermin, they laughed, pulled at the string that lifted the bucket, and the snout of their resident rat shot out. In the more crowded cells, sleeping occurred in shifts. Makeshift hammocks criss-crossed the cells. Some prisoners tied themselves to the bars in order to sleep. These men were confined for months on end. I met men who had been there for two or three years. The punishment cells were the same. There at least the prisoners’ stay was temporary, but beatings were more likely.

When we went into these wings, initially there was silence, but as the prisoners noticed us, an eruption ensued and the men called out “*Padre, Padre! Senhora, Senhora!*” Up and down the corridor, arms holding out pieces of paper appeared through the chapas. On each of these scraps was written the same thing—the prisoner’s case number. Would we check out their case, get in touch with a lawyer, find out what stage it was at? The noise was not only to draw our attention. It

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was also cover to prevent the guards from overhearing conversations.

Later I learned what an ominous sign silence is. In a punishment wing in Manaus, I was greeted with absolute quiet and suspiciously clean cells, each holding only two men. Twenty-four hours later, I was approached by a group of about twenty wives and mothers clutching letters from prisoners describing the emptying of the cells before my arrival, threats from the governor and nightly humiliation rituals,

which involved being forced to strip, immerse themselves in sewage, and insert their fingers into each others' anuses.

Medical care was practically non-existent. If they turned up for work, and if the guards brought them any patients, the doctors were often not prepared to touch the prisoners, either through fear of infection or disdain. Tuberculosis and scabies were rampant. Prisoners lifted t-shirts and pulled down shorts' elastic to show us bruises from beatings, festering bullet wounds and scabies rashes. One elderly prisoner was allowed to use a cell as a nursing station. "You know what he's in for?" asked Chico. "Impersonating a medical doctor!" Quite often lack of medical care is an indirect cause of beatings at night: someone in a cell needs medical attention, the cellmates call for the guards, the frightened guards ignore them, the whole corridor starts to bang on the doors, and the guards come in with their sticks.

Detainees who make it into the prison system and avoid the punishment and isolation cells are the lucky ones. A third of detainees are held in police lock-ups while they await trial, a process that may take years. These were never designed to hold long-term prisoners, so conditions are even worse than the jails: no windows, no exercise yard, 30, 40, 50 men to a cell. They are guarded by civil police who resent having the role of jailer foisted upon them, and who regularly resort to torture as a means of control. We visited these places too. One police chief we met, a woman, very *brasileira*, with her long hair, perfect manicure and bright red suit with above-the-knee skirt, had the prisoners taken out of their cells, stripped naked and forced to run a gauntlet of policemen wielding sticks. "That one," muttered Chico, "is a bitch on wheels."

The issue had been sex. The system may foster every imaginable humiliation and degradation, but the right to what the Brazilians call "intimate visits" remains sacrosanct. The men are permitted to receive their wives and girlfriends into their overcrowded cells. Sheets are hung across bunks to afford some privacy, or cardboard cubicles are constructed in prison halls. In one community-run prison with a reformist agenda, three rows of blue tents bobbed in a yard while a queue waited patiently at the gate. In the women's prisons, intimate visits are curtailed. This is the first thing that the women complain about. The "bitch on wheels" was the only case I came across of anyone interfering with these visits. Her ban led to a riot that led to the gauntlet. "She got all steamed up because one of the guys' girlfriends was only 15," said Chico, indignantly. "The girl's mother was fine about it!" A couple of years later, I asked a visiting Brazilian congressman, a successful promoter of prison reform

in the southern state of Porto Alegre, for his impressions of the British jails he had just visited for the first time. His reaction, half puzzled, half horrified: "They don't allow intimate visits here!"

Not least because Brazil *is* big, reform is slow and depends on individual state administrations. The reach of any federal government initiative is limited. The crime rate is rising, as is the prison population. The problems do not go away. How satisfying, therefore, to be able to blow up the House of Detention! The Minister of Justice came down from Brasilia to witness the event, and was accompanied on the specially erected podium by the State Governor, who had the honor of pressing the red button. When he did so, three of the prison's most notorious blocks—Pavilions 6, 8, and 9—collapsed in on themselves in great clouds of dust, and seven seconds later were reduced to 80 tons of rubble.

Chico was not there to see it. In November of 1999, he keeled over and died of a massive heart attack. He was 59. He had been happy that day, driving back from visiting a jail in the state of São Paulo with one of his colleagues. He was beginning to feel that they were getting somewhere. Nor did he live to see Colonel Ubiratan Guimarães go to trial, charged with the homicide of 111 prisoners. This was something absolutely unprecedented in Brazil—a senior military policeman standing trial for the consequences of his orders. He was found guilty and sentenced to another big number: 632 years. Chico would never have believed it possible, although he would not have been surprised to hear that the Colonel has not served any of his sentence in jail.

I was at the trial of Colonel Guimarães. This may sound interesting, but words cannot convey how boring a Brazilian trial is. The first few days are spent reading out, word for word, every piece of written evidence, in no particular order and in a monotone voice. One evening when I was coming home from court my taxi driver asked what I thought. Was he guilty? I said yes, and explained why—not normally a popular opinion with taxi drivers. "Yes," he said, "I think so too. My brother was in Pavilion 9 when the massacre happened. It was bad in there." A little later he explained to me why his speakers were missing. He had been robbed the night before, again. "The eighth time," he said. "Kids—they're drugged up, they've got a gun, they hold up a taxi and get it to drive around until the petrol runs out. No taxi driver in São Paulo ever drives with his tank more than half full," he said. I admired his pragmatism. He sighed and said, as Brazilians often do, "*Está complicado, viu?*" You know, it's complicated. "Yes," I said. "Yes, it is." □