

Brazil: Dictatorship-era Torture Techniques and Secret Executions Revealed in Declassified U.S. Documents

43 State Department Records Made Public by Brazilian Truth Commission

By [Peter Kornbluh](#)

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#), [History](#),
[Police State & Civil Rights](#)

The Brazilian military regime employed a “sophisticated and elaborate psychophysical duress system” to “intimidate and terrify” suspected leftist militants in the early 1970s, according to a State Department report dated in April 1973 and made public last week. Among the torture techniques used during the military era, the report detailed “special effects” rooms at Brazilian military detention centers in which suspects would be “placed nude” on a metal floor “through which electric current is pulsated.” Some suspects were “eliminated” but the press was told they died in “shoot outs” while trying to escape police custody. “The shoot-out technique is being used increasingly,” the cable sent by the U.S. Consul General in Rio de Janeiro noted, “in order to deal with the public relations aspect of eliminating subversives,” and to “obviate ‘death-by-torture’ charges in the international press.”

Peter Kornbluh who directs the National Security Archive’s Brazil Documentation Project called the document “one of the most detailed reports on torture techniques ever declassified by the U.S. government.”

Department of State **TELEGRAM**

POL 29

SAO PAULO

MACTION: POL INFO: CG DPO RF CHRON

~~SECRET~~
Classification

RECD: 03/0859L JUL 72

R 011515Z JUL 72
FM AMEMBASSY BRASILIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC
INFO RIO DE JANEIRO RECIFE SAO PAULO

~~SECRET~~ BRASILIA 2386

SUBJ: ALLEGATION OF TORTURE IN BRAZIL

REF: STATE 116598 AND 117951

1. IN PREVIOUS DISCUSSIONS WITH MEMBERS OF CONGRESS WHO HAVE INQUIRED INTO ALLEGED MISTREATMENT OF PRISONERS IN BRAZIL, SPOKESMEN FOR US ADMINISTRATION HAVE MADE CLEAR THAT THERE IS VALID BASIS FOR SUCH CHARGES, AND HAVE CITED STATEMENTS BY HIGH BRAZILIAN OFFICIALS WHO, IN ACKNOWLEDGING TRUTH OF ALLEGATIONS, HAVE CLAIMED THIS NOT CONDONED. PEAK OF SUCH REPORTS WAS REACHED IN PERIOD 1968-69, BUT REMAINED AT HIGH LEVEL DURING 1970 AND FIRST HALF OF 1971. WHILE STILL HEARD WITH SOME FREQUENCY, THERE HAS BEEN MARKED REDUCTION DURING PAST YEAR OF PRIVATE AND PUBLIC REPORTS OF INCIDENTS. THIS REDUCTION IS UNDOUBTEDLY DUE IN GREAT PART TO GOB SUCCESS IN SUBSTANTIALLY REDUCING NUMBER OF ACTIVE TERRORISTS; NEVERTHELESS THERE IS EVIDENCE OF A CONSCIOUS POLICY FROM THE TOP TO ELIMINATE THE MORE GROSSLY EXCESSIVE POLICE MEASURES--ESPECIALLY BY MILITARY PERSONNEL--WITHOUT UNDERMINING THE CONTINUING AND NOTABLY SUCCESSFUL BATTLE AGAINST TERRORISM.

2. THUS THERE IS AMPLE EVIDENCE THAT HARSH INTERROGATION TECHNIQUES ARE STILL BEING EMPLOYED AT REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS, IN SOME AREAS AND BY SOME SECURITY UNITS MORE FLAGRANTLY THAN IN OTHERS. DESPITE STRONGLY ADVERSE INTERNATIONAL PUBLICITY ON QUESTION, AND DESPITE DISTASTE OF AT LEAST MOST HIGH OFFICIALS FOR SUCH MEASURES, IT IS UNLIKELY THAT EXCESSES WILL BE TOTALLY ELIMINATED AS LONG AS THIS SECURITY-MINDED GOVERNMENT BELIEVES THAT THERE STILL EXISTS A SIGNIFICANT TERRORIST THREAT, TO THE ELIMINATION OF WHICH IS ASSIGNED FIRST PRIORITY. RIGHTLY OR WRONGLY, MANY BRAZILIANS ATTRIBUTE THE SUCCESS OF ANTI-TERRORISM PROGRAM TO THE STRENGTH OF MEASURES EMPLOYED AGAINST SUBVERSIVES AND THERE ARE

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FORM 4-68 FS-412(H)

DECLASSIFIED Authority NND 53384 by MPI/AMW on 5/19/2014

Image: "Allegations of Torture in Brazil."

Titled "Widespread Arrests and Psychophysical Interrogation of Suspected Subversives," the document was among 43 State Department cables and reports that Vice President Joseph Biden turned over on June 17 to President Dilma Rousseff during his trip to Brazil for the World Cup competition for use by the Brazilian Truth Commission. The Commission is in the final phase of a two-year investigation of human rights atrocities during the military dictatorship which lasted from 1964 to 1985. On July 2, the Commission posted all [43 documents](#) on its website, accompanied by this statement: "The CNV greatly appreciates the initiative of the U.S. government to make these records available to Brazilian society and hopes that this collaboration will continue to progress."

The records range in date from 1967 to 1977. They report on a wide range of human rights-related issues, among them: secret torture detention centers in Sao Paulo, the military's counter-subversion operations, attitudes of the Church on human rights violations, and the regime's hostile reaction in 1977 to the first State Department human rights report on abuses. Some of the documents had been previously declassified under routine release procedures; others, including the April 1973 report on psychophysical torture, were reviewed for declassification as recently as June 5, 2014, in preparation for Biden's trip.



Image: Declassification Diplomacy.

During his meeting with President Rousseff, Biden announced that the Obama administration would undertake a broader review of still highly classified U.S. records on Brazil, among them CIA and Defense Department documents, to assist the Commission in finalizing its report. “I hope that in taking steps to come to grips with our past we can find a way to focus on the immense promise of the future,” he noted.

Since the inception of the Truth Commission in May 2012, the National Security Archive has been assisting the Commissioners in obtaining U.S. records for their investigation, and pressing the Obama administration to fulfill its commitment to a new standard of global transparency and the right-to-know by conducting a special, Brazil declassification project on the military era. “Advancing truth, justice and openness is precisely the way these classified U.S. historical records *should* be used,” according to Kornbluh. “Biden’s declassified diplomacy will not only assist the Truth Commission in shedding light on the dark past of Brazil’s military era, but also create a foundation for a better and more transparent future in U.S.-Brazilian relations.”

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treatment, according to persons who have either undergone the series or have talked with persons who have, is as follows:

- 1) The suspect is picked up, usually at gunpoint, and ordered to come with two plainclothes policemen;
- 2) A hood is placed over the detainee's head and he (or she) is forced to lie down in the back of the police vehicle which transports him to the interrogation center;
- 3) The suspect is stripped nude and is made to sit alone in either a completely darkened cell or a refrigerated cell for a period of several hours. This cell is wired with loudspeakers which emit sounds of screaming, sirens, and whistles at high decibel levels;
- 4) The detainee is then interrogated by one or more agents who let it be known what crime the police believe the person has committed and what measures might be used against the person if he is uncooperative;
- 5) At this point, if the suspect does not confess, and if it is believed that he is withholding valuable information, he is subjected to increasingly painful physical and mental duress until he confesses. He is placed nude in a small dark room with a metal floor through which electrical current is pulsed. The shock felt by the individual, though reportedly light in intensity, is constant and eventually becomes almost impossible to withstand. The suspect is usually kept in this room for several hours. He may then be transferred to several other "special effects" rooms in which devices are used to instill fear and physical discomfort. Extreme mental and physical fatigue sometimes results, especially if the person undergoes such treatment for two or three days. All during this time, he is not allowed food or water;
- 6) For a period of at least 10 days, the suspect is held incommunicado; if a person is detained when no witnesses are present, his whereabouts or fate is often unknown by relatives for days or weeks.

Two types of suspects are generally not subjected to the application of the entire pattern given above: (1) those who

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Image: From "one of the most detailed reports of torture ever declassified by the US government."

To call attention to the records and the Truth Commission's work, the Archive is highlighting five key documents from Biden's timely donation.

The Documents

Document 1: Department of State, "Widespread Arrests and Psychophysical Interrogation of Suspected Subversives," Confidential, April 18, 1973

This intelligence cable, sent by the U.S. Consul General in Rio de Janeiro, provides detailed reporting on a "sophisticated and elaborate psychophysical" method of torture being employed by the Brazilian military against suspected militants. In response to growing international condemnation of human rights violations, the cable suggests, the Brazilian torturers have adopted more modern interrogation methods that leave less visible evidence of abuses. In cases where detainees are "eliminated," the military is also deceiving the press by claiming they were killed in a "shoot-out" while trying to escape.

The cable was declassified on June 5, 2014, only eleven days before Biden's trip to Brazil in order for him to provide it to President Rousseff as a diplomatic gesture. But key sections of the document are redacted, presumably at the request of the CIA, that identify the military units responsible for these atrocities — information that would be of critical use to the

Brazilian Truth Commission as it attempts to hold the military accountable for the atrocities of the past.

Document 2: Department of State, “Political Arrests and Torture in São Paulo,” Confidential, May 8, 1973

The Consul General in Sao Paulo, Frederic Chapin, reports on a source described as “a professional informer and interrogator working for the military intelligence center in Osasco,” an industrial suburb of Sao Paulo. The source has provided graphic details on methods of abuse, including a Brazilian form of “waterboarding” that involved putting prisoners in vats of water that forced them to stand on their tiptoes for prolonged periods of time to be able to breath. The informant also provides a description of methods of executing prisoners so that their bodies could not be identified. Prisoners would be machine gunned from head to toe — a method referred to as “sewing” the suspect up.

This document was declassified in 2005, and initially provided to the Truth Commission by National Security Archive Brazil project director Peter Kornbluh. It played a key role in enabling researchers to identify the April 18, 1973, cable on psychophysical abuses, which is cited as a reference telegram. A memorandum of conversation with the informant/torturer, however, is also cited in this document and would be of exceptional value to the Truth Commission in obtaining additional information about the torture center in Osasco.

Document 3: Department of State, “Allegation of Torture in Brazil,” Secret, July 1, 1972

U.S. Ambassador William Rountree advises the State Department that openly protesting human rights “excesses” by the Brazilian military government will be counterproductive and “damage our general relations.” Ambassador Rountree encourages the State Department to oppose a piece of human rights legislation known as the “Tunney Amendment” which would link U.S. aid to Brazil to a U.S. government certification that the Brazilian regime was not engaged in human rights violations.

Document 4: Department of State, “The Esquadrão da Morte (Death Squad),” Limited Official Use, June 8, 1971

Ambassador Rountree submits an 11-page report on death squad activity in Brazil. He advises that there has been an “upsurge” of victims of unofficial operations in recent months, believed to be the work of off-duty policemen. In Sao Paulo, the death squads are reportedly led by Sergio Fleury, who has now been charged in at least one murder. Some of the victims are common prisoners, others political figures and militant opponents of the regime. Much of the information in the report is gleaned from newspaper articles; the report appears to contain almost no intelligence information.

Document 5: Department of State, “Conditions in DEOPS Prison as told by

"Detained American Citizen," Confidential, October 7, 1970

This memorandum of conversation contains a report by a U.S. businessman, Robert Horth, who was detained by the military police in an apparent case of mistaken identity. Horth relates hearing from fellow Brazilian prisoners about torture at the prison where he is held in downtown Sao Paulo. The torture techniques include the Parrot Perch — known in Portuguese as "pau de arara" — and electrical shock to all parts of the body, as well as the "telephone technique" where an interrogator stands behind the seated prisoner and smacks both sides of his/her head repeatedly, almost destroying their eardrums.

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