

Rape of Girl, 15, Exposes Abuses in Brazil Prison System

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BRASÍLIA — The police jail at Abaetetuba could not be torn down soon enough for Márcia Soares, a lawyer and federal human rights official here. To her, the jail has come to symbolize everything that is wrong with [Brazil](#)'s efforts to safeguard women and children from violence.

It was at Abaetetuba, in the northeastern state of Para on the fringes of the Amazon, that a 15-year-old girl arrested on suspicion of petty theft was illegally placed among 34 male inmates in late October. For 26 days they treated her as their plaything, raping and torturing her repeatedly. Sometimes she traded sex for food; other times, she was simply raped, federal investigators here said.

The police in the jail did more than turn their backs on the violence. They shaved her head with a knife to make her look more like a boy, investigators said, and now are blaming her for lying about her age.

The case is causing soul-searching here in Brazil's capital, where federal officials have become increasingly concerned about the treatment of women and minors in the nation's crowded prison system and the failure of judges throughout the country to prosecute cases of torture.

Women make up only 5 percent of Brazil's prison population, but the number is growing. States have not built enough jails and prisons with separate facilities for women, even though federal law requires such separation. A recent study commissioned by the government of President [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#) showed that female prisoners were being illegally placed with men or transvestites in five Brazilian states, and being subjected to torture and sexual abuse.

Even as Brazil was raised in November to the [United Nations](#)' highest human development category, its spotty human rights history and mixed record of punishing those guilty of abuses have been an Achilles' heel internationally. A SWAT team operates in Rio de Janeiro to root out and kill drug traffickers with impunity. The police are rarely convicted under a 1997 law against torture, because of an "institutionalizing of torture" under Brazil's military dictatorship and more than 300 years of slavery, said Paulo Vanucchi, Brazil's human rights minister.

The case of the 15-year-old will be another test of justice in the largely lawless Amazon region. Two years ago, a Brazilian rancher ordered the killing of Dorothy Mae Stang, 73, an American-born nun and rain forest advocate. She was shot to death on a jungle road. The rancher, Vitalmiro Bastos de Moura, was sentenced to 30 years in prison.

What has been particularly disheartening to federal human rights officials in the case of the 15-year-old girl is how many people had the chance to protect her. Ms. Soares, the

lawyer, said the police, the judge and a public defender who had visited the jail all knew the teenager was in an all-male setting.

“Several officials were aware of what was happening, and at worst they were complicit in it,” Ms. Soares said. “It’s a very serious situation.”

Ana Júlia Carepa, the governor of Para, has been scrambling to clean up the mess since the situation became public late last month. Ms. Carepa pressed Raimundo Benassuly, the state police chief, to resign the day after he said publicly that the girl had lied about her age because she had a “mental deficiency.” The police have said that the girl had claimed she was 19, not 15, during several run-ins with the law.

Ms. Soares said that officials, including the judge in the case, a woman, did not press the girl for documentation proving she was an adult, even though she is under five feet tall and weighs about 80 pounds. “When I first saw her I thought she was 12, not 15,” Ms. Soares said.

For Ms. Carepa, the girl’s age is beside the point. “If she is 15, 20, 50, 80 years old or almost 100, it doesn’t matter,” she told journalists in Rio last month. “A woman cannot be in a cell with men.”

Ms. Carepa said that the jail would be torn down and replaced with something that has facilities for women.

The judge who placed the girl in the all-male jail, Clarice Maria Andrade, is being investigated and could lose her job. Two others in her office are accused of altering a document to make it seem as if the judge had approved a transfer from the jail shortly after the police made the request, not 12 days later.

Local officials were already familiar with the girl before she was arrested and placed in the Abaetetuba jail on Oct. 21. Growing up in a broken home, she had left school before and frequented an area known for child prostitution, Ms. Soares said. At the time of her arrest, she was shuttling among her parents’ homes and an uncle’s house, and no one seemed to keep careful tabs on her. During the 26 days, no relative came to the jail looking for her.

Within her first two days in jail, a man raped her in the bathroom, the girl told investigators. Inmates rely on visiting relatives to bring food. With no such visits, extreme hunger soon overtook the girl and she began trading sex for food, investigators said. Other men, however, simply raped her when they wanted to, and tortured her for amusement, investigators said. Some placed crumpled papers between her toes as she slept and lighted them, Ms. Soares said, adding that the girl still had burn marks on her feet.

Residents heard the girl’s screams from the road, which is near the jail windows. Yet for weeks no one came to her rescue. It was only after an anonymous note reached the local child protection services agency that she was removed from the jail.

In recent days, she and her family have been relocated under a federal witness protection program. The girl's father complained of death threats from the police. He said they had tried to press him to say that the girl was 19 or 20.

"It's now up to us to protect her and help her to start a new life," Ms. Soares said. "And we need to keep up the political pressure, so that justice has a chance."