

Brazil child rights activist meets Boston's kindred spirits

By Philip Bennett
GLOBE STAFF

Ivanir dos Santos looked like the coldest person in Dorchester yesterday. He wore a new sweater, a jacket that was too small, a muffler, cap and gloves — indoors. He gazed outside like someone preparing for a spacewalk.

"It was 110 degrees in Rio when I left," he said in Portuguese-accented Spanish. To test whether he was getting through, he added, smiling, "It is colder than that here."

Dos Santos is a former street child in Rio de Janeiro who has become one of Brazil's leading defenders of children's rights. He was invited by Amnesty International to Boston, where he spoke at Harvard and met human rights and local black activists.

His work involves one of the most grisly and unfathomable subjects in the Americas: the murder of thousands of homeless children by "extermination groups" in Brazil comprised often of off-duty policemen paid by local merchants or residents.

Dos Santos believes the killings — 450 last year in Rio alone — are the product of racism, because nearly all of the victims are black. This view, passionately argued, has helped make him a prominent activist and a target of death threats.

Yesterday, dos Santos was given a walking tour of Codman Square and other areas of the city by Rev. Eugene F. Rivers 3d of the Azusa Christian Community. The men sought to find common ground to help explain urban violence in two societies where people of African descent have similar experiences.

"We have to make these global connections," said Rev. Rivers, who has promoted relationships between black churches in the United States and Latin America. "The Brazilian story is unreal. Six-year-old kids being shot in the head. But the same social forces are pushing people down."

"There are similarities in the violence involving blacks in Brazil and here," dos Santos said. "We have problems with police, we have problems of drug traffic growing in areas where there are no health, education and job services. We have a great problem with television, which portrays the poor as criminals from the

time we are born.

"The main thing in common is that blacks in Brazil and the US are not foreigners, unlike African immigrants in Europe. We are both discriminated against in our own countries," he said.

Rev. Rivers said: "We want to form a strategic alliance between black organizations in the United States and in Brazil, to get out this story. Once people in the black community hear about the genocide against these children in Brazil, people are really going to go off."

The men walked down Washington Street to the offices of Rev. Bruce Wall Ministries. Dos Santos said his group, the Center for the Representation of Marginalized Peoples, became the first to document the murder of homeless black children, in 1988, long after the practice began.

He said authorities deny a racial component to the killings. He told of an attempt on his life in 1991.

The killings continue in part because white Brazilians either ignore or condone the "mopping up" of homeless children blamed for bringing crime to commercial and residential districts, he said.

Tisha Brown, who works for Rev. Bruce Wall Ministries, said: "It's a comforting, ignorant bliss that a country lives in." Someone else nodded, saying, "Look at Charles Stuart."

Afterwards, the group held hands and prayed. Rev. Rivers pledged to convene a teach-in on Brazil.

"In order for us to develop a common strategy, I need to understand why black youths are killed here, and why they kill each other," dos Santos said.

"Part of black on black violence here is this self-hatred that is a psychopathology" of growing up in a divided society, Rivers said.

"Exactly, this is like Brazil. But the thing is to transform that anger into a constructive force!" dos Santos said.

The two men stood outside the courthouse, conversing passionately through an interpreter. They planned to visit a housing project, talk with teen-agers, and tell the story to as many community activists as they could meet in a day.

The visitor from Brazil no longer seemed cold.



GLOBE PHOTO / EVAN RICHMAN

Ivanir dos Santos (left) of Brazil and Rev. Eugene Rivers walk around in Dorchester.

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IVANIR DOS SANTOS

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