

70 die in 4 days of violence in Brazil

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SAO PAULO, Brazil - Prison riots and attacks on police by a criminal gang extended into Monday, raising the reported death toll to 70 in four days of violence that has started to choke normal life in South America's largest city.

Brazilian media reported that the federal government was preparing to send troops to enforce control of Sao Paulo.

Officials said Sunday the death toll had reached at least 52 after at least 100 separate attacks since Friday, but the Globo TV network reported that additional overnight attacks had raised the toll to more than 70.

Most of those dead were reported to be police officers targeted by a powerful criminal gang protesting the prison transfer of some of its leaders. Officials said they had arrested at least 72 suspects.

Attacks on public buses prompted many companies to halt service, stranding thousands of people trying to reach work Monday.

Video on TV showed the buses engulfed in flames, while Folha Online news service said passengers were ordered out of the vehicles before bandits set them ablaze.

Officers in bulletproof vests set up checkpoints to search vehicles, and barriers were placed in front of many police stations.

Assailants attacked patrol cars, bars where off-duty policemen gather, a courthouse and a highway police outpost. Local media reported that the assailants used guns, shotguns, grenades, machine guns and homemade bombs.

Witnesses to the killing of police officer Jose Antonio Martinez told Folha Online that two men wearing masks approached as the officer was dining with his wife, shot him several times in the head, and ran. His wife was unhurt.

"We can't let this pass," Nilo Faria Hellmeister, a police officer and friend of Martinez, told the news service.

A few miles away, witnesses said two groups of men bearing large-caliber weapons appeared in front of a fire station and began shooting at random, killing a firefighter.

Dozens of new prison rebellions also broke out, with 41 riots under way across Sao Paulo state Sunday. Inmates held more than 229 prison guards hostage.

Enio Lucciola, spokesman for the Sao Paulo State Public Safety Department, said the attacks and prison rebellions, planned by the First Capital Command, known by its Portuguese initials PCC, "were the most vicious and deadliest attacks on public security forces that have ever taken place in Brazil."

The rebellious inmates, however, have not made any demands nor have they harmed any of their hostages, said Jorge de Souza, a spokesman of the Sao Paulo Prison Affairs Department.

He said visiting relatives were inside several of the prisons but that "we don't consider them hostages because they are there to show solidarity with their jailed relatives. They don't want to leave."

The attacks were in response to the transfer of several imprisoned PCC leaders, a practice authorities use to sever prisoners' ties to gang members outside prison.

Eight PCC leaders were among 765 inmates transferred to a remote, high-security facility in the far western tip of Sao Paulo state.

Lucciola said authorities were prepared for some kind of PCC attack once the transfer of its leaders became known.

"But we never imagined it would be so big or ferocious," he said. "It caught us by surprise."

The PCC was founded in 1993 by hardened criminals at the Taubate Penitentiary in Sao Paulo but remained a relatively obscure group until February 2001, when it organized the biggest prison uprising in Brazil's history.

The gang is involved in drug and arms trafficking, kidnappings, bank robberies and extortion, police say.

During a 10-day period in November 2003, the PCC attacked more than 50 police stations with machine guns, homemade bombs, shotguns and pistols. Three officers and two suspected gang members were killed and 12 people injured in the apparent attempt to pressure authorities to improve prison conditions.

The 2001 prison uprising organized by the PCC resulted in the deaths of 19 inmates as the rebellion spread to dozens of penitentiaries and jails across Sao Paulo state.