

Brazilian crime group defies police

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SAO PAULO, Brazil - Less than a year ago, a top Sao Paulo law enforcement officer boasted that police had all but destroyed one of Brazil's most notorious crime groups.

"The PCC's days are numbered," Godofredo Bittencourt, head of the Sao Paulo police's organized crime unit, said in July after announcing the arrest of 11 members of the group widely known by the initials.

But this week, the PCC proved him deadly wrong, unleashing an unprecedented four-day crime wave that has left at least 100 people dead, among them 40 police officers.

From inside the Sao Paulo state penitentiaries, the PCC used cell phones to order its "soldiers" to attack bars, banks and police stations with machine guns, grenades and molotov cocktails and set buses on fire. The gang also orchestrated uprisings in more than 70 prisons across the state.

The violence came in response to the transfer of eight imprisoned PCC leaders to a high security facility in an attempt to sever their ties to gang members on the outside. But the attacks were also the PCC's way of "baring its claws to intimidate authorities and society," said Guaracy Mingardi, a former Sao Paulo police inspector and current U.N. adviser on crime.

"Using guerrilla tactics, the PCC periodically strikes out to let everyone know they are alive and well and that they are still a force to be reckoned with," he said.

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 a wave of rebellions at 29 prisons across the state left 19 inmates dead.

At the time, it was the biggest prison uprising in Brazil's history and took police 27 hours to crush.

Experts say that while the PCC and similar gangs were originally formed to pressure authorities to improve prison conditions, they quickly abandoned that objective and began using their power inside the state's prisons to direct drug dealing and extortion operations on the outside.

The PCC used violence to rapidly dominate other prison gangs and became the most powerful organized crime group inside and outside Sao Paulo's prison system.

"It won't be easy to dismantle the PCC because there is no central command to be destroyed," Mingardi said. "It is structured in such a way that if its top leadership is killed or completely isolated, someone else will take over."

There are no official numbers on the size of the PCC, but Mingardi estimated its membership comprises some 10,000 people in and out of prison who are involved in drug and arms trafficking, bank holdups, kidnappings, extortion and killings.

Petty criminals who are indebted to the PCC and those wanting to join the group are forced to take part in attacks against police targets like the ones that have taken place this week, Mingardi said.

The PCC stages spectacular attacks to "intimidate society and demoralize authorities," said Walter Fanganiello Maierovitch, an expert on organized crime and Brazil's former drug czar.

The purpose, he said, is to force authorities to negotiate with the group so it can obtain benefits like longer visiting hours, better food, conjugal visits and television sets that give it more power and prestige behind bars.

This week's attacks against buses and banks show that the PCC, which normally aims its wrath against police, has now included civilians on its hit list, Maierovitch said. He fears this means the group will one day begin targeting such individuals as judges, journalists and politicians.

Mingardi disagrees.

"I think the PCC will think twice before going after civilians because it doesn't want to risk attracting the hatred of residents in the poverty stricken suburbs of Sao Paulo where they recruit their new members - young boys and girls with no future ahead of them," he said.

The PCC is an extremely dangerous group because its leadership is made up of young, violent criminals who are more intelligent than ordinary criminals, Maierovitch said.

"Marcos Willians Herbas Camacho, the top leader of the PCC, is an extremely bright person," he said. "He has even read 'Dante's Inferno' so he knows very well how to turn our lives into a veritable hell."