

# Days of Violence by Gangs in São Paulo Leaves 115 Dead Before Subsiding

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SÃO PAULO, [Brazil](#), May 16 — Widespread violence eased Tuesday after five days of attacks on police headquarters, buses and public buildings that paralyzed this city, South America's largest, and left 115 people dead.

The news media here said the violence ceased after the overwhelmed police authorities met Sunday with the leader of the powerful organized crime group that orchestrated the onslaught, who was reported to have ordered a truce by cellphone from his prison cell.

But both sides later denied striking any deal. "The government did not submit to any demands or requests," Marco Antônio Desgualdo, director general of the state's civil police force, said in an interview on Tuesday. "The police did not negotiate."

Government officials also dismissed local news reports that the police had used the crisis to kill suspects they had previously singled out as gang members. A police crackdown during the battles led to the arrest of more than 100 suspected gang members and the killing of 71.

While most of the dead were suspected of being criminals, some 40 police officers were also killed, and the scale of the fighting has prompted many to question an already shaky faith in Brazil's public security forces.

As the authorities sought to restore order and pursue those they believed to have been responsible, residents and security experts criticized police officials and São Paulo's state government, which they argue was unprepared to manage the crisis and turned away help to avoid political embarrassment.

"This was a total lack of responsiveness," said Oscar Vilhena, a lawyer and political scientist who co-directs Conectas Human Rights, an independent organization based here. "The offensive was bigger than anything the police had planned for and beyond the scope of what the government thought was possible."

São Paulo's prisons, notorious for their crowded conditions, have effectively become operating bases for gang leaders, who use bribes and force to orchestrate drug deals, rackets and other illicit activity from behind bars with smuggled cellphones and radios.

Over the last five days, the gang leaders coordinated more than 250 attacks, executions and uprisings in about 70 prisons in São Paulo State. The prison riots ended Monday night and about 200 hostages were freed, the authorities said.

The violence was touched off by a decision by state officials to move the leaders of the so-called First Capital Command — the largest criminal gang in São Paulo and the group that organized the rebellion — from prisons in the city of São Paulo to another prison in a distant corner of the state.

The move was planned to thwart an expected uprising in prisons during family visits on the Mother's Day holiday on Sunday. Instead, it spurred a bigger rebellion that quickly spread through the streets of the city, its suburbs and outlying areas of the state.

Gang leaders commanded supporters outside the prison, thousands of whom were on furlough for the holiday, to attack police stations. Gang members and copycat criminals later proceeded to attack other sites, including banks, a subway station and some 80 buses, which were emptied of passengers and torched.

Four civilian bystanders were killed in the attacks, prompting residents on Monday to leave offices, shops and schools early to get home by nightfall. Because bus companies pulled many of their vehicles from circulation, the mass flight led to traffic jams in the nonpeak hours of the afternoon.

By dark, São Paulo's usually bustling thoroughfares were largely empty, save for police checkpoints where officers, pistols and automatic rifles at the ready, scrutinized what little traffic there was.

The federal government offered to send troops to support the state forces, which by law are those charged with the state's security. But Cláudio Lembo, the acting governor, declined the offer on Monday, calling it unnecessary and arguing that the violence was "under control."

The decision prompted a wave of criticism that the refusal was politically motivated. Mr. Lembo's predecessor, Geraldo Alckmin, recently stepped down as governor to run for president, and any failure of state policies could easily be used politically in what is expected to be a re-election bid by President [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#).

"Federal intervention would look bad for the state's security policies and by extension for the Alckmin candidacy," said Alba Zuluar, director of a research program on violence and security issues at the State University of Rio de Janeiro.

"The government should spend more time trying to stop this kind of activity instead of trying to keep itself in office," Noélio Alves Ferreira, 62, a shopkeeper in Conjunto dos Metalúrgicos, a western suburb of the city, said in an interview. "We get shot at while they make political calculations."

He said he was awakened by gunfire at 1 a.m. on Tuesday. Assailants, firing on a police station next door, fled past his house, still shooting. When the gunshots subsided, he discovered a hole made in an upstairs wall by a shotgun blast and a spent shell on the sidewalk below.

Afraid of a possible attack, Lúcia Sousa da Silva, 46, a grocer who lives across the street, shut her shop early on Monday, losing the evening's sales. "The police are totally outgunned," she said. "They try to protect us, but really they're unprepared."