

Gang kicks around political clout

The First Command of the Capital is the biggest gang in the Western Hemisphere. It showed its clout in a recent crime wave that paralyzed a Brazilian state that has 40 million people.

THE MIAMI HERALD
MAY. 31, 2006

SAO PAULO - The crime gang called The First Command of the Capital began 13 years ago as a prison soccer team. Today, it's the biggest gang in the Western Hemisphere, with an estimated 85,000 to 125,000 members.

It's so powerful that when prison officials planned to move 765 of its leaders to an isolated, maximum security facility earlier this month, gang leaders responded with a crime wave that paralyzed Sao Paulo, a state of 40 million people, for four days.

Gang members burned dozens of Sao Paulo's public buses, attacked banks and subway stations and incited 82 prison rebellions. Police estimate the gang launched 339 attacks from May 12 to May 20. More than 170 people died, including 42 police officers and prison guards.

"The government didn't know the gang's reaction would reach this level of intensity," said José de Jesus Filho, a lawyer with a prison ministry in Sao Paulo. "They didn't realize the [gang] has enormous ambitions. It doesn't just want to challenge the government's power. It wants to take that power."

The attacks by the PCC, as it is known by its Portuguese initials, further fueled intense national concern over public security in Brazil, whose rate of firearms fatalities -- 36,000 in 2004 in a country of 188 million people -- is the highest in the world. That's a rate of about one per 5,222 people, compared to one per 182,311 people in the United States.

The May attacks also were a public coming out for the gang that has quietly dominated the prisons and slums of Sao Paulo but been overshadowed, at least in the media, by gangs in Rio de Janeiro, which regularly fight flashy turf battles.

THE AGENDA

At the core of the PCC's ambitions is a prison-rights agenda aimed at defending prisoners from torture and other abuses endemic in Brazil's prisons.

The gang's 16-point manifesto declares a war on the ``penal establishment . . . without truce, without frontiers until the final victory."

The PCC's leader is Marco Willians Herbas Camacho, a 38-year-old convicted bank robber better known as Marcola or "the playboy." He maintains control despite his solitary confinement in the Presidente Bernardes penitentiary in Sao Paulo state, Brazil's only super maximum security prison.

Known as a voracious reader, Camacho has been in prison all his adult life. He's currently serving a 39-year sentence, although he has escaped several times.

"He and the PCC entered a vacuum left by the government, which had stopped even giving prisoners soap or enough food," said 51-year-old Francisco Carlos dos Santos, who was incarcerated alongside Camacho for more than five years before being released in 1998.

With its activist slant, the PCC quickly won followers.

It calls itself "the party," and its members "brothers." It adopted "Liberty, Justice and Peace" as its slogan, the same as its Rio de Janeiro counterpart, the Red Command.

The gang is even suspected of nurturing electoral ambitions.

"It's a political entity that has adopted crime as a means," said Alvino Augusto de Sa, a criminology professor at the University of Sao Paulo's law school. ``They're not people who don't know what they're doing. They are very lucid and they have a plan."

One of the PCC's first moves was to ban prison rapes among inmates, with those declared guilty sentenced to death, usually by strangulation or mass stabbing. It also launched prison rebellions to protest beatings and other abuses committed by guards, including a massive revolt in 29 prisons in 2001.

MONTHLY DUES

It charges its members monthly dues, about \$22 from prisoners and \$220 from those on the outside, and uses the funds to hire hundreds of lawyers who help incarcerated members fight for better prison conditions and early release.

The gang also provides food and other necessities to prisoners and their relatives, as does Rio's Red Command.

"The treatment of prisoners in maximum security is very aggressive, and not everyone can handle it," said Iracema Vasciaveo, a lawyer who represents many within Sao Paulo state's prisons and is accused by government officials of having ties to Camacho.

“We are fighting for the dignity and the personal integrity of prisoners.”

'MARGINALIZED' RIVALS

The PCC's activism on behalf of prisoners helped it to overtake more traditional gangs dedicated solely to drug trafficking and other criminal activity, said Fernando Salla, a prison specialist at the University of Sao Paulo.

The size of the PCC's membership, estimated to touch as much as 90 percent of Sao Paulo state's 141,500-strong prison population, also dwarfs those of the most powerful U.S. gangs. Los Angeles' biggest faction, the 18th Street gang, for example, claims about 10,000 members.

"Their presence is very impressive," Salla said. “They have totally marginalized all of their rivals, and they've used this perception of having a political side to draw support.”

To ex-prisoner Olivier Cerqueria Dias de Moraes, this month's attacks showed what the PCC actually is: a shadow army capable of challenging Brazil's elected government.

"How did the government expect to move all of the leadership and hundreds of pilots way out in the middle of nowhere and get away with that?" de Moraes asked. “There was no way the PCC was going to let that happen, not without a war.”

Despite the war, authorities moved the PCC's leadership to a remote prison in the interior of the state of Sao Paulo.