

# New Attacks by a Heavily Armed Gang Rattle Brazil

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SÃO PAULO, [Brazil](#), Aug. 12 — The powerful criminal group whose street battles with the police paralyzed this metropolis three months ago has begun a new series of attacks, mocking government efforts to reduce its influence, alarming citizens and igniting a partisan political dispute.

The new offensive, which began this week, has killed far fewer people than the more than 180 left dead in May. But the number and variety of targets chosen is larger: more than 200 sites in a score of cities and towns, including government offices, banks and police and bus stations.

The criminal group that has claimed responsibility for many of the attacks, First Capital Command (P.C.C. are its initials in Portuguese), is a prison-based network that in the past has used such shows of strength as a bargaining chip to demand better conditions for its estimated 10,000 members behind bars.

“A new fact in these attacks are the cities in the interior” that have been chosen as targets, said Col. Elizeu Teixeira Borges, commander of the São Paulo military police. “They’ve even attacked a church, which makes no sense.”

The city of São Paulo is the largest in South America, with more than 10 million people in the city itself and another 10 million in the metropolitan area. With more than 40 million inhabitants, the state of the same name is more populous than California and accounts for nearly one-quarter of Brazil’s total population and about 40 percent of its economy.

The new attacks, which were preceded by a shorter wave of raids last month, have caused consternation. The gang has consistently shown itself to have more firepower than the police, including grenades, mortars and other weapons legally available only to the armed forces, which has contributed to a sense of helplessness among residents.

“We’re always hearing about [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon and [Al Qaeda](#) in Iraq, and it all seems so very far away,” said Nelson Kimura, a university student here. “But we have also an alien organism in our body politic, one that the state here, as there, seems unable to control.”

With Brazil’s presidential election less than two months away, the gang’s guerrilla-style attacks have quickly become a campaign issue. President [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#) of the left-wing Workers’ Party, who promised vastly improved public security as a candidate four years ago, is seeking a second term. His main opponent is Geraldo Alckmin of the center-left Brazilian Social [Democratic Party](#), who was governor of the state of São Paulo until election laws forced him to step down.

On Friday, Mr. da Silva took part in a ceremony at a military base in the suburbs here and renewed an offer of federal help — in the form of as many as 10,000 army troops — made this week by his minister of justice.

“Society must defeat these bandits,” he said. “We cannot be threatened or defeated by banditry.”

But Mr. Alckmin’s supporters and many political analysts have interpreted the offer of troops as aimed at weakening his candidacy.

If the state government were to accept the army presence, the message to voters around the country would be that “the crisis in São Paulo’s security can’t be resolved without Brasília’s help.” O Estado de São Paulo, the state’s most important newspaper, concluded on Wednesday. “Lula would gain

by showing that the state government has not been able to control the P.C.C. and would benefit by linking a sense of security among the populace to the army.”

At an impromptu news conference here late Thursday, Cláudio Lembo, who became governor of São Paulo when Mr. Alckmin resigned, said the presence of the army would constitute “inappropriate interference” in his state’s affairs. “This interference has not occurred because they know it would not be requested or accepted,” he said, adding, in reference to the troops, “We don’t need them here at this moment.”

According to Brazilian press reports, the armed forces themselves are wary of such duty. Mr. da Silva has already dispatched troops to Rio de Janeiro on a limited, temporary basis to fight drug gangs there, with mixed results at best: a 35-year-old schoolteacher was shot dead at a military roadblock and some military weapons ended up in the hands of drug lords who are said to have followers infiltrated among soldiers.

On Friday, Mr. da Silva was accompanied by his ministers of justice and defense, and, in what seemed to be an effort to show that the military stands behind his plan, the commander of the Brazilian Army, Gen. Francisco de Albuquerque, and the officer in charge of the regional garrison here. In his remarks at the military base, the president referred to the rift between the state and federal governments in his address at the police academy, saying, “People are recognizing that the gravity of the situation demands that we be comrades so that a solution can be found.”

Violence appeared to be tapering off at week’s end, but the authorities remain worried about new outbreaks. Sunday is Father’s Day in Brazil, and an estimated 13,000 prisoners, including many affiliated with the First Capital Command, are entitled to a weekend furlough.

Security officials had sought to deny the furloughs, but a judge here ruled this week that such an action would be illegal. The police said they now planned to cancel all days off for officers and to “monitor” furloughed gang members, but Mr. Lembo also issued an appeal to the gang and its leaders to act with “good sense.”

“We are preserving their dignity and integrity,” he said, noting that the police had not killed any jailed or paroled gang members during the latest outburst of violence. “Now I hope there will be reciprocity on their part.”