

Brazil's slums face a new problem: vigilante militias

Off-duty and former police, prison guards, and firefighters are moving in to oust the drug gangs.

The Christian Science Monitor
February 08, 2007

RIO DE JANEIRO - Homicides claimed more than 6,000 victims in Rio de Janeiro last year, many of them in gang violence fought by organized crime gangs seeking to control the sale of marijuana and cocaine in the city's *favelas*, or shantytowns.

As if inter-gang violence were not enough, there is now a new element in the mix. Militias formed by off-duty and former cops, prison guards, and firefighters are moving in to oust the drug gangs and install their own brand of extortion.

"The militias are unquestionably criminal groups," says Marcelo Freixo, a former human rights activist who studied the phenomenon before being elected to Congress in October. "They push out the traffickers and they charge residents a security tax they are obliged to pay. They control through force but it is not to provide security, it is to make money. One group makes money by selling drugs, the other through terror."

Militias now control more than 90 of Brazil's 600-odd *favelas*. Their violent tactics and growing power caught the attention of new Rio Governor Sergio Cabral. Mr. Cabral's appointees last week removed a top police officer suspected of running one of the militias.

Since taking office on Jan. 1, Cabral has made tackling Rio's myriad problems a priority, and the removal of Inspector Félix dos Santos Tostes is seen as a further indication of his commitment.

But while the controversial decision focused attention on the power struggles taking place in Rio's poor communities, it also poses a more significant question for the 9 million residents of a city long plagued by crime: Does it mark a new dawn in Rio's struggle against violence, or is it merely a temporary show of strength by a newly elected official seeking to impress?

"We often see new leaders taking such moves when they come to power," says Renato Devito, a security expert at the Brazilian Institute of Criminal Sciences. "This is a good sign and shows that authorities can

react. But often these actions lead to nothing. We need to wait and see what happens next before declaring Rio is heading in a new direction."

Government officials say Mr. Tostes, an adviser to the former police chief, helped lead a band of paramilitaries against one of the drug gangs that control most of Rio's *favelas*. In recent months, the militias have stepped up their activities and now dominate 92 *favelas*, according to Mr. Freixo.

Currently, about 1 in 5 Rio residents lives in a *favela*, a frequently lawless community that often lacks basic sanitation, potable water, lighting, and policing.

But while most citizens want to see drug traffickers ousted, few are enthusiastic about the paramilitary alternative.

Firstly, the militias are not true law enforcement bodies. And secondly, the militias bring their own set of problems.

Not only do the power struggles inevitably cause bloodshed, but when militias do prove victorious they often use their status to charge protection money from residents, exercise control over pirated cable television feeds, and the distribution of cooking gas, and even dictate who runs the small minibuses that shuttle to and from the communities.

"Militias charge a 'security tax' just as in the Chicago of Al Capone in the 1930s," Rio newspaper O Globo wrote in a recent editorial warning of the dangers they pose. "The next step, as with the mafias, will be to profit from drug trafficking."

The issue of who controls security is of fundamental importance to Rio's well-being, with the city's world-famous carnival less than two weeks away and the Pan American Games taking place here in July.

A day of violence caused by drug gangs in December left 19 people dead and prompted fears of further bloodshed similar to what happened in São Paulo in May when organized crime brought the city to a standstill with attacks on police stations, buses, supermarkets, and banks.

The December attacks prompted Cabral to ask for federal reinforcements but the arrival of troops has done little to halt the killing.

Some people, including former security officials, even equate Rio's situation to a low-level war, with the UN reporting that the number of people shot dead in Brazil each year surpasses the annual death toll in

the Central American civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s, the first Gulf war, and the conflicts in the Soviet Caucasus in the 1990s.

As if to confirm the war parallel, angry residents last week launched a web site modeled on the popular US site iraqbodycount.com. With murders in Rio so common they no longer make headlines, the sites creators set up a local version called riobodycount.com.

So far, the web site death toll averages around 10 a day, a conservative estimate given that 17 people died each day from homicides last year, according to government figures.

Whatever the exact number, the total is high and underlines the enormity of the task facing Cabral.

"People are killing each other but no one realizes how high the numbers are because it's a few dead here and a few dead there," says Vinicius Costa, one of the [riobodycount](http://riobodycount.com)'s creators.

"The war is here and we can't let these deaths become just forgotten numbers. We wanted to wake people up," he says.