

Stray bullets rain down on violent Rio

The Miami Herald
Jun. 20, 2007

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil --

The toll from stray bullets that rain down on Rio from the city's steep hillside slums as police and drug gangs battle with automatic weapons has grown sharply, with one innocent bystander killed or wounded every day.

Businesses and schools in the line of fire have been shuttered. Thousands of children are staying home. Even air travel is affected - domestic jet routes were diverted from Rio's downtown airport when shooting flared up in a slum near Copacabana beach that the planes had to fly over. And travelers avoid driving the Red Line highway to the international airport at night because it passes near one of the worst live-fire zones.

In-the-know tourists and business travelers are shelling out extra for beachfront views, as much to be safe from flying bullets from the slums that line the back of the tony beach communities as for the view. And even in the city's best neighborhoods, apartments facing the hillside slums can be worth 60 percent less than units in the same building that are less likely to be hit.

Such concerns have become more urgent as the city of 8 million prepares to welcome thousands of athletes for the Olympic-style Pan American Games in July. While Mayor Cesar Maia stressed this week that Rio traditionally hasn't had major violence at its annual carnival and New Year's celebrations, the city plans to deploy 15,000 police to provide security during the games.

For the first time, the government has acknowledged the problem and has begun to track the toll from stray bullets in quarterly reports. It found they killed or wounded 87 people during the first three months of this year.

One of the latest victims, Ailton Lopes Moreira, was shot in the chest Sunday on his way to the supermarket. It's likely no one will ever know who killed the 53-year-old engineer. Police believe the bullet was fired from over a mile away, from a shantytown where 47 days of open warfare between police and drug traffickers have killed 23 people and wounded at least 67.

"I thought it was a heart attack. ... It was only when the ambulance came that I discovered he had been shot," said the victim's wife, Lucimere Negrao, 45. "It happened so quickly."

Rio de Janeiro is notorious for having one of the world's highest homicide rates. While only 19 of the 4,539 people killed by guns last year in Rio were hit by stray bullets, nearly 10 percent of the 2,098 people wounded by firearms were unintentional victims, according to the State Security Institute.

Most killings happen on the poor north side, a drab urban sprawl that extends for miles behind the mountaintop Christ the Redeemer statue, which looks down over the city's richer neighborhoods and white sand beaches.

But given the city's striking urban geography, nowhere is safe from the bullets. Hilltop shantytowns known as favelas tower above the best neighborhoods, and gleaming condominium towers rise up in clear sight of poor slums controlled by heavily armed drug gangs. At night, the bullets' red tracers light up the sky.

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva maintained this month that banner headlines about stray bullets are overblown. But the coach of Brazil's national volleyball team called it "an urban war," and said he's concerned about the safety of athletes' families during the games.

"Rio is the champion of stray bullets," said Antonio Rangel Bandeira, coordinator of the disarmament project for the anti-violence group Viva Rio. "Other cities in Brazil are equally or even more violent, but none has as many victims of stray bullets."

Rangel blames an arms race between police and drug traffickers. Both sides now use heavy caliber automatic weapons like AK-47s or M-16s that can send bullets flying indiscriminately, far beyond their targets.

In the upscale Leme neighborhood near Copacabana Beach, real estate agent Neimar Valladares admits he was scared during a recent shootout.

"I can see the shantytown from the back of my apartment, and my heart was in my mouth as I had to duck down with the bullets whizzing by," Valladares said.

Meanwhile, in the favelas, war-weariness has set in.

"Shootouts are an everyday thing here: My cousin's been shot, the lady next door's been shot," said Edivaldo Lins Genuino Junior, a 23-year-old construction worker whose leg has been held together by a metal brace since he was struck by a stray bullet while walking to work in May.

Authorities accuse gangs of intentionally shooting slum dwellers and then blaming police. But some favela residents say the officers are to blame.

Rio's police kill about 1,000 civilians a year, virtually all classified as acts of self-defense. And they have a strong defender in Rio de Janeiro Gov. Sergio Cabral, who insists on heavy weaponry to keep up the pressure until the gangs give up their territory.

"There will be no treaty," he said this month. "We will retake public spaces for the public."

For now, the shootouts have turned into something like a trench war, with neither side giving much ground.

In the Vila Cruzeiro favela, police officers nervously finger the triggers of their assault rifles at check points, trying to prevent weapons and ammunition from getting in, while traffickers relax just a few hundred yards away, smoking marijuana and lounging on street corners alongside their AK-47s and piles of banana clips.

Leandro Sales de Oliveira, a 28-year-old doorman, said he was hit in the leg by a police bullet in May.

"The police saw me coming and opened fire," he said. "For them, everyone in the favela is a target. They shoot first and ask questions later."

Police spokeswoman Carla Rocha said authorities could not comment because Oliveira did not file a complaint.