

13 killed by police in Rio slum

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RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil --

Police killed at least 13 suspected drug traffickers in a huge operation Wednesday aimed at ending a war between authorities and gangs that has raged for nearly two months in a Rio de Janeiro slum.

Authorities said 1,350 heavily armed officers and elite federal police supported by helicopters and armored cars descended on the sprawling Alemao shantytown and were met by automatic weapon fire and hand grenades.

At least 40 people have been killed and more than 80 injured since May 2, when the conflict in the Alemao was touched off by the killing of two police officers.

Rio de Janeiro state security chief Jose Mariano Beltrame earlier said 18 were killed in Wednesday's operation, then revised the death toll to 13 without giving an explanation. The dead were all suspected members of gangs that control the city's thriving drug trade, he said.

"There were no innocent people killed," Beltrame told a news conference, adding that the operation would continue indefinitely.

Authorities said at least 10 people were wounded, most of them innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire or hit by stray bullets.

Beltrame said police entered areas of the slum where they have had no presence for years, resulting in intense fighting.

It took police about five hours of battling gang members through narrow alleys to get to one of the traffickers' main strongholds, Beltrame said. Some officers were then redeployed to rescue two units pinned down by heavy fire.

Beltrame denied the operation had anything to do with the upcoming Pan American Games, scheduled to take place in Rio next month. Security is a key concern for the July 13-29 games, when thousands of athletes and hundreds of thousands of spectators are expected in the city.

"The operation could have taken place two months ago, but the consequences would have been much worse," Beltrame said. "We used the time to gather intelligence and achieve our objectives."

Officials announced separately on Wednesday that 2,000 more elite police will be sent to Rio in coming days to boost security for the games and that 6,000 overall will eventually be in place for the event.

Shootouts between drug gangs and police are a daily occurrence in Rio, which has an annual homicide rate of about 50 per 100,000 residents.

Police said they entered the slum Wednesday to serve arrest warrants and seize drugs and arms, but did not immediately disclose a tally of arrests or arms confiscated.