

BRAZIL

Rio police called brutal, corrupt

Police in Rio de Janeiro have retaken some slum neighborhoods from drug gangs, but, residents said, some police officers are more violent and dishonest than gang members.

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RIO DE JANEIRO --

Although he knew the risks he was running, Jorge da Silva Siqueira Neto, a father of six, refused to keep his mouth shut when police officers from a nearby battalion overran the slum where he lived and began terrorizing his neighbors.

Siqueira, 35, who headed the slum's residents association, sought out journalists, prosecutors and anyone else who would listen as he told horrific tales of extortion, torture and executions waged by out-of-control police.

Then on Sept. 7, he disappeared.

He's presumed dead, and his friends are convinced he was killed by the police he blew the whistle on.

MORAL CRISIS

For many of the 12 million people who live in Rio de Janeiro, Siqueira's brave truth-telling revealed the moral crisis facing this state's 50,000-strong police force as it battles heavily armed drug gangs for control of the city's hundreds of slums.

Public trust in the police has reached dismal lows, as accounts of police abuse and corruption multiply daily. Many say that the police have become indistinguishable from the drug gangs they're fighting.

"Jorge didn't die because there was no knowledge of the danger he was in," said Rossino Diniz, a friend who is the president of a federation of slum residents associations.

"There was no will to listen to him. He was saying things no one wanted to hear, and no one did anything. No one wanted to touch the power that police have in this city."

Over the past year, hundreds of state police officers, including whole battalions, have been linked to a shocking range of crimes, from drug dealing to indiscriminate killings to even arming the drug gangs they're fighting.

ILLEGAL MILITIAS

Police have formed illegal militias that have seized dozens of slums from gangs only to practice the same violent power over residents' daily lives. Siqueira was denouncing one such police-led militia when he disappeared.

State police records show that more than 5,000 officers are being disciplined for a range of conduct violations.

Critics trace the genesis of the crisis to earlier this year when Gov. Sergio Cabral ordered the police to reclaim, at all costs, whole neighborhoods from drug gangs.

The police moved aggressively, invading slum after slum in pitched battles that shut down parts of the city for days.

INITIAL SUPPORT

At first, the operations won popular support from residents weary of constant battles between drug gangs. But public opinion began to turn as evidence mounted that many of those killed by police had been shot at close range, meaning they had likely been executed.

Cabral defends the police, saying the vast majority of officers are "honest workers" who shouldn't be lumped in with the few caught breaking laws.

But the public uproar was so great that Brazil's federal government invited a special U.N. human rights rapporteur to visit the city's slums and investigate the charges. After an 11-day visit, the rapporteur, Philip Alston, concluded that the country's police are allowed to "kill with impunity in the name of security."

There's no doubt that Rio police use deadly force more than almost any other police force in the world. In the first 10 months of this year, they killed 1,072 people in confrontations. By comparison, police in Chicago, a city with eight million people, killed 17 people in all of 2006.

FIVE-YEAR PLAN

Responding to the crisis, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has launched a five-year, \$3.7 billion public-safety plan that, among other measures, brings more social services to slums and gives police officers and their families more education and support.

An acquaintance of Siqueira -- who asked not to be identified for fear of retribution -- noted that although the four police officers whom Siqueira denounced remain in jail on suspicion of leading the illegal militia, Siqueira's disappearance remains unsolved.

"Unlike the residents who suffered quietly, Jorge spoke the truth," the acquaintance said. "And look where it got him."