The assault on Rio's favelas and the growth of state repression in Brazil

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The confrontation between police and drug traffickers that broke out last week in the *favelas*, or shantytowns,of Rio de Janeiro reached a shocking level of violence. With the support of the national government of Workers Party President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the governor of Rio de Janeiro, Sérgio Cabral of the opposition PMDB party, ordered civil and military police, together with the National Security Force, into one of the biggest combat operations against the traffickers in the state's history.

The estimated toll for just one day (June 26) was 22 people killed and 11 wounded in the group of 12 hillside favelas known as the Alemão complex. An army of some 1,350 armed men backed by tanks and helicopters was mobilized for the operation.

The Alemão complex sprawls across three square kilometers and is located in the hills of Rio de Janeiro's northern zone, only a few kilometers from the glamorous tourist haven in what is considered South America's "beach capital." Side-by-side with the luxury maintained principally for national and international tourism live some 300,000 people crowded into these hillside slums, a third of them surviving on incomes worth less than US$200 a month.

In terms of education, per capita income, life expectancy and health care, the conditions confronting the people living in these *favelas* are inferior to the conditions of life of some countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The Human Development Index (HDI), used by the United Nations Development Program to evaluate the quality of life for different populations, places the Alemão complex at 0.587. The HDI for Gabon stands at 0.637 and that of Cape Verde at 0.722. In some European countries, the index is almost double that of Rio's favelas: Norway (0.927); Belgium (0.923) and Sweden (0.923). Brazil as a whole stands 69th in the ranking of the world's 177 nations in terms of HDI, with an index of 0.792.

The Alemão complex is considered the headquarters of the Comando Vermelho (Red Command), a group that emerged in 1979 in the Cândido Mendes prison at Ilha Grande, Rio de Janeiro, as a result of interaction between convicts and imprisoned members of armed political groups that had fought the military dictatorship. From the 1980s on, drug trafficking, particularly in cocaine, was responsible for a substantial increase in the power of Comando Vermelho, which began to obtain substantial weaponry, including machineguns, grenades and anti-aircraft weapons. Clashes between the police and the traffickers became common in the region, but the scale of last week's operation was unprecedented.

The Alemão complex has been occupied by the police since May 2. The aim of the occupation was the capture of those responsible for the death of two soldiers, Marco Antônio Ribeiro Vieira and Marcos André Lopes da Silva, both of the 9th Battalion, who were murdered with over 30 bullets on the first of May.

After collecting intelligence for more than a month, the police decided to attack. On Friday, June 26, on the eve of the operation, the Information Center of the Civil Police knew that on the following day drug traffickers would meet in a house in the Grota favela, where arms and drugs of the Comando Vermelho were hidden. It was the moment the police were waiting for.

The police gathered at 5 a.m. at the Civil Police firing range in the northern zone of Rio and set out for Alemão. The siege began around 9 a.m. The police were met by gunfire, initiating an armed confrontation with the traffickers that continued for seven hours.

The day of the massive police assault was tragic for those living in Alemão. In the Grota favela, innocent victims were carried through the alleys of the slum in the arms of relatives and neighbors. "This is a war. My granddaughter was shot inside the house," said the grandfather of Larissa de Andrade Silva, wounded in the ankle and taken to the Getúlio Vargas Hospital in a minibus. The grandfather preferred not to identify himself.

A little later, Wesley Glauco, 17, from the same favela, was admitted to the hospital with a bullet wound. In the Fazendinha favela, Arlete dos Santos, 48, was shot in the back, while Karen Cristina Batista Borges, 20, suffered wounds from grenade shrapnel in her left leg. Both were admitted to the hospital.

At round 4:30 p.m., three armored cars of the Military Police descended with the first bodies from Grota. A driver in minibus was forced to stop by the police, who loaded six bodies inside the van to be taken to the stationhouse.

Relatives and neighbors of Bruno de Paula, 20, wrapped his body in sheets and dragged it through the streets to the entrance to the favela, where they began a demonstration against the police operation. The protest was repressed within minutes, when the police fired pepper gas canisters at the group.

"This boy wasn't a bandit," one woman, who asked not to be identified, said. Civil police seized the body and took it to the Medical Legal Institute.

Maria de Lourdes Alves, 50, also charged that the police were carrying out violence against the residents inside the favela. "People leave their homes and they don't know if they will come back alive," she said. "I haven't eaten lunch, because after what I saw in the morning when I left home, I have not had the courage to go back into Grota until the police leave."

Another favela resident said that he would press charges against the police for taking money from his house. "Can't we even trust the people who are supposed to help us?" he asked, before being taken away by the police.

A statement by the government that there were no innocents among the victims provoked revulsion in the local population. The Civil Police was unable to cite any criminal records for the dead who had been identified, increasing suspicion that they had killed innocent victims.

Three adolescents aged 13, 14 and 16 were among those officially listed as dead by the police. Residents of the Alemão complex said that only 9 of the 22 people killed had been involved in crime.

On the day of the police assault, the atmosphere in favelas of the

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Alemão complex was of a civil war character. The police action forced the closure of at least eight of the region's schools. For several days, some 4,600 children were kept out of the classrooms. UNICEF issued an alert on the situation of children stopped from studying because they live in zones of conflict and compared the students in the Alemão complex with those in the Gaza Strip and Iraq.

The urban violence in Brazil "prevents girls and boys from going to schools," UNICEF executive-director Ann Veneman said in a press release. "Attacks on children are unacceptable. Schools should be secure environments for girls and boys to be able to learn and develop."

According to the statement, the situation facing children who went to school during this period was even worse. "The children stayed without classes or were transferred to one school where thousands of students divided the classrooms between four daily shifts lasting just 2 hours and 15 minutes," UNICEF reported.

Others compared the operation in the Alemão complex with what has been taking place in Haiti at the hands of United Nations "peace keepers." In February, the Cité Soleil neighborhood, among the poorest and most violent in the Haitian capital of Port au Prince, was confronted with a similar operation with 750 troops from various countries under Brazilian command invading the slum and leaving six dead.

The death toll in Alemão complex is substantially higher. In the 60 days since police first began occupying the favelas, 46 people have been killed and 84 wounded.

The BBC correspondent in Brazil, Gary Duffy, declared that "it was clear that the police were not very well received by the favela residents. They did not trust the police." Duffy, who has been covering Brazil for only three months, reported on the conflict in Northern Ireland between 1984 and 1998. "There is a certain similarity between what happened here and what happened in Northern Ireland," he said. "There, when the police or army entered the Catholic areas, the women would come out with metal pot lids and bang them on the ground to warn the people involved with the IRA. Here in Alemão, there were people shooting off fireworks to warn the traffickers that the police were coming."

The residents fear being killed in the crossfire, and those who are able are leaving the area. Various houses and apartments around the favelas have been put up for sale. When they are sold, it is for a very low price.

The photographer Sidraque Santos, 41, who was born and lived his whole life in the Rio favelas, said that he has never seen a police operation like the one last Wednesday. After the operation the photographer admitted that he is thinking of leaving his hillside home. "There is no way to stay here," he told the Brazilian daily *Estado de São Paulo*. Santos said that "in the Cruzeiro favela, there was a youth who was approached by the police and ran off. The police shouted 'stop, stop, stop.' He didn't stop and the police fired. When they came to see the boy's body, they found he was carrying identification from the deaf-mute association."

The open violence in the Alemão complex last week is the clearest manifestation of the deepening state repression in Brazil. However, this repression is directed not only against organized crime. In the favelas, the principal victims of these confrontations are the average people who live there.

Moreover, the violent attitude of the Lula government and its allies in the state government has as its objective to demonstrate to the population as a whole that they are prepared to do anything to suppress those who oppose them.

It is no coincidence that just days before the assault on Alemão, the governor of Sao Paulo, José Serra, deployed shock troops at 2:30 in the morning to repress and expel students who were occupying the building of the School of Sciences and Letters at UNESP (Paulista State University) on the Araraquara campus in the interior of Sao Paulo. The students were taken to the police station.

Similarly, the Lula government on May 31 sent 150 officers of the Federal Police to invade the Cipla and Interfibra factories in Joinvile, Santa Catarina state. The factories had been occupied by the workers and the government issued arrest warrants for their leaders on the grounds that they owed money from the firm for social security. Why Lula didn't send in the police to arrest the factories' owners, who were the ones who defaulted on social security payments, was not explained. Nor was it explained why similar police action was not taken against Bando Itaú and Unibanco or at the construction firm Mendes Júnior, which together owed already in 2005 some 1 billion reais (approximately US$500,000) in unpaid social security contributions.

Thus, it is only the impoverished favela residents, the factory workers and the student youth who are the targets of these police state methods. But are these repressive measures taken by the Brazilian government an expression of its strength?

Let us examine the situation in which the Lula government finds itself: since beginning its second first term in office, the government has undergone a steady decline in credibility due to an endless series of corruption scandals. In May, the Minister of Mines and Energy Silas Rondeau was forced to resign after his involvement with a mafia gang exploiting public works projects, led by the construction firm Gautama, was discovered. Lula's older brother, Genival Inácio da Silva, known as Vavá, is under indictment for trafficking in government influence on behalf of the so-called slot machine mafia, which exploits illegal gaming. If Lula still retains relatively high popularity ratings in the opinion polls it is as a result of government handouts, like the family basket program. These programs, aimed at the poorest workers who live under extremely precarious conditions, serve only to keep these workers in poverty, while making them continuously more dependent upon the government.

For its part, the parliament is also sinking into the swamp of corruption. The lover of Renan Calheiros, the president of the Federal Senate, revealed recently that support payments for her son from the senator are paid for by the giant construction firm Mendes Júnior.

Forced to defend themselves against new charges that arise nearly every week, the government and the parliament are completely paralyzed. They spend the bulk of their time seeking to prove their doubtful innocence.

The deepening crisis of rule has also found reflection in a growing militancy among both workers and youth, with thousands participating in recent demonstrations in major Brazilian cities. Faced with a growing challenge from below, the federal government of Lula and its allies in the various states are increasingly turning to their last resort for controlling the masses, police repression.

This is the real social and political context of the massive assault on Rio's Alemão complex. More than an anti-crime operation, it serves as a warning to workers and students in Brazil of what the government is capable of doing against those who defy it.

This was precisely the tone taken by Lula in giving his order to the commander of the Air Force on June 25, when the air traffic controllers were staging a work-to-rule, delaying flights at various Brazilian airports. Lula declared: "put the house in order to maintain the functioning of the airports and military discipline, because it is necessary to respect the hierarchy." The president and ex-worker concluded, "I have carried out many strikes in my life and I am able to see when they are in bad faith."

Certainly, Lula led the strikes in the ABC industrial cordon surrounding Sao Paulo in the 1980s with much "good faith," winning the confidence of the ruling class, which ultimately gave him broad support for becoming president of the republic in order to carry out a role for which he was better suited than anyone: blocking the movement of the masses. Now, to serve this same purpose, he is forced to turn to the police and army, sending them against the workers in the favelas and the factories, and against the students in the universities, to defend the interests of big capital.

In the face of these developments, there is only one way forward for

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workers and youth in Brazil: the building of a new revolutionary leadership in opposition to the union and student bureaucracies which are allied to the corrupt government.

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