

Brazil's poor evicted to make way for Olympics

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The October 2009 announcement that Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's "marvelous city", would host the 2016 Olympic Games was met with enthusiastic celebrations on the streets of Rio and the beaches of Copacabana. Then-President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva broke down in tears over the victory, insisting that it was another sign that "Brazil is no longer a second-class country; it's a first-class country."

A year and a half later, it has become clear that winning the Olympic bid has unleashed a process that is only widening the immense class-divide that has grown in tandem with the Brazilian economy.

According to some estimates, as many as 1.5 million families could be forced from their homes as part of the urban renewal and infrastructure projects that are taking place not only in Rio, but also in other major Brazilian cities, in preparation for both the Olympics and the World Cup, which is to be played in Brazil in 2014.

The immediate targets of this campaign are the *favelas*, the self-constructed shantytowns that are home to approximately one in four Brazilians.

The escalating effort to carry out wholesale removal of some of the poorest sections of workers from these urban neighborhoods has been met with criticism from the United Nations and human rights groups.

The UN's Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing, Raquel Rolnik, issued a public report last week based on numerous charges of people being evicted and displaced in an arbitrary manner that violates basic human rights.

"I am particularly worried about what seems to be a pattern of lack of transparency, consultation, dialogue, fair negotiation, and participation of the affected communities in processes concerning evictions undertaken or planned in connection with the World Cup and Olympics," Rolnik said.

She added that families being thrown out of their homes were being offered inadequate compensation, threatening to relegate them to homelessness. This was "even more striking," she said, "given the increased value of real estate in locations where building is taking place for these events."

In Rio de Janeiro, three new express highways are to be built over land now occupied by *favelas*, along with new stadiums and other infrastructure.

The minister of human rights in Brazil's Workers Party government, Maria do Rosario, told the Reuters news agency that the evictions were taking place in "areas at risk".

"We don't believe there are forced evictions," she said, adding "many of these areas are areas at risk, where people are living in very precarious conditions." She claimed those being moved were being given "more adequate housing."

The reality, however, often involves the brutal use of force. In Restinga, one of the poor communities in western Rio, which was targeted for removal to make way for a highway, heavily armed civil and military police invaded the area along with bulldozers used to knock down a commercial district that had been in existence for two decades.

Police invaded houses, carting out furniture, to prepare their demolition. Cops set up a cordon around the area to prevent residents from getting back into their homes.

No warning was given of the operation, and residents were ordered to sign documents giving up their homes for apartments in a distant public housing estate without being allowed to read them. They were told that if they refused, they would get nothing.

Residents of three of the western Rio *favelas* filed a formal complaint with the Organization of American

States in January, charging that they were arbitrarily being evicted in a manner that violated their human rights.

“The residents are not totally opposed to relocation,” said Eduardo Pereira, an advisor to the *favela* communities. “But they want things to be done right, they want to have alternatives and they want the authorities to talk to them before they go ahead with the relocations.”

At demonstrations against the removals, residents have protested that they are being treated like “second class citizens” and “urban garbage.”

During a week long visit to Brazil last month, Amnesty International’s secretary general, Salil Shetty, warned that this campaign could “escalate very significantly” in the run-up to the Olympics.

“They are giving these people houses that are 50 kilometers from their places of work, or compensation which is a pittance,” he said. “The communities really are not involved.”

In the *Favela do Metro* in north Rio, created by railroad construction workers more than 30 years ago, demolition is half completed, with remaining families left surrounded by rubble. They are being removed to make way for a parking lot, part of a \$1 billion project to refurbish Rio’s famed Maracana stadium and its surrounding area in advance of the World Cup. Those who have refused to be relocated to distant suburbs are reportedly being forced out with nothing.

Residents who took the alternative housing found that it lacked electricity or running water and had no surrounding infrastructure such as schools or health clinics. Those who move there lack the means to get to their jobs in the city.

Similar “urban removal” projects are being executed in cities across the country, including Sao Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Curitiba, Porto Alegre, Recife, Natal and Fortaleza. In Sao Paulo, thousands of families have been evicted to make way for a project known as “Agua Espaiada”, with more than 10,000 other families facing the same fate. In Belo Horizonte, 2,600 families face eviction for another project.

These mass evictions are taking place at the same time as a luxury housing boom is building in cities like Rio and Sao Paulo. According to a recent survey by the Brazilian weekly *Veja*, Rio de Janeiro has become the fourth most expensive city in the world, in terms of

housing costs in wealthy neighborhoods, trailing only Monte Carlo, London and Hong Kong.

The cost of housing in Rio has risen 145 percent over the past five years and in the beachside district of Ipanema, it has soared by 380 percent.

On the one hand, this real estate boom makes it impossible for the poorly paid workers being evicted from the *favelas* to find any affordable housing nearby. On the other, it provides an added incentive for their expulsion as the real estate interests seek new areas to build profitable new projects.



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