

Brazilian army, police occupy Rio de Janeiro slums

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At 4:30 a.m. Sunday morning, government troops occupied three Rio de Janeiro neighborhoods – known as *favelas* – Rocinha, Vidigal and Chácara de Céu, all located in the southern part of this city. These three communities occupy the hills that separate the very wealthy neighborhoods of Gávea, Leblon and Sao Conrado, home to many of Rio's most privileged families.

Originally, impoverished immigrants from Northeastern Brazil built *favelas* in unoccupied steep hillsides. These vertical slums are home to millions of Brazilians in Rio de Janeiro and other cities.

Brick and mortar homes replaced the original shanties, and many of the homes have electricity and running water. Rocinha, one of the largest *favelas* in Latin America, is now a working class community with 54,000 homes clinging to the hillside. During heavy rains, tons of refuse are washed down these hill communities together with some of the remaining shacks. Over 120,000 workers and their families reside in Rocinha, Vidigal and Chácara de Céu.

Sunday's assault was no surprise. Preparations had been carried out more or less openly since last Tuesday. On Thursday morning, police captured Antonio Bonfim Lopes, also known as Nem. Nem, who allegedly heads a drug gang that controls Rocinha, was arrested together with some of his associates. After Nem's arrest, police announced that they would move into Rocinha on Sunday.

During the days following Nem's arrest, Brazilian military police set up checkpoints to control access to these neighborhoods. Early Sunday morning, before the assault, a force of three thousand police and soldiers tightened a security noose around the *favelas* while security forces moved in, consisting of Marines and other troops.

The invaders used sledgehammers to break down doors and walls to enter many of the homes in the slums. Also participating in the assault were naval sharpshooters controlling the high ground above the *favelas*, Military Police, Municipal and Federal Security forces, plus a complement of bulldozers, 24 armored vehicles and 7 attack helicopters.

An occupation force of 1000 troops then searched the homes of suspected gang members, and recovered weapons, drugs and vehicles that are thought to belong to the criminal gang. Few arrests were made. It is thought that the bulk of the gang members had left on previous days in anticipation of the raid.

In an interview, the Secretary of Public Security, José Mariano Beltrame, said that the occupation of these neighborhoods resulted from a month of planning, involving cooperation among separate security institutions.

Civil Police Chief Martha Rocha declared that the slum community had been returned to its inhabitants. An occupation force is scheduled to remain at the slums for several weeks. The Pacification Police (UPP) that will control these three communities indefinitely will then replace the occupation force.

The month-long preparations followed by the public announcement of the raids on Rocinha, Vidigal and Chácara de Céu gave gang members time to disappear. This is consistent with a practice of the Brazilian security forces who surround working class communities, disarm and occupy them. The drug operation simply provided a convenient pretext.

On Sunday, Business Week/Bloomberg pointed out that the PCC model is being applied in several key *favelas*—those that border on wealthy communities or are close to future sports events. Rocinha will be the 19th working class slum to come under UPP control.

Furthermore, this is the latest in a systematic campaign by Río de Janeiro and other cities to prepare the country for the 2014 World Soccer Cup and the 2016 Olympic games.

There are 1000 *favelas* in Río de Janeiro. Roughly 1,200,000 people live there, or 20 percent of the city's population. Río authorities have attempted to control and regulate these *favelas* since 2009, with the construction of 'Eco Walls,' around some *favelas* both to limit expansion and restrict the movement of *favela* inhabitants. In May of this year, the government escalated its campaign, with the forceful removal of *favela* residents both to make room for Olympic and Soccer infrastructures, and to free up land for commercial and luxury residential development.

The occupation of Rocinha, Vidigal and Chácara de Céu are the latest instances of the security preparations for the Soccer and Olympic competitions.

Brazil has one of the worst levels of income and wealth inequality in the world, exceeded in the industrialized world only by South Africa.

Conscious of the potential social explosions that invariably result from such conditions, the administration of current President Dilma Rousseff is carrying out a two-pronged strategy: combining modest programs to ameliorate extreme levels of poverty—programs that barely scratch the surface of the conditions of millions of impoverished people—and beefing up security measures to clamp down on urban and working class unrest.

These measures are consistent with the role of the Rousseff administration and that of ex President Lula, to ensure a stable investment climate for transnational corporations and the banks.



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