

Brazilian government sends troops to Bahia state

Bill Van Auken
18 April 2014

Brazil's Workers Party (PT) government has deployed thousands of combat-equipped troops to Bahia in response to looting and violence that erupted amid a strike by Military Police in the northeastern state.

Nearly all of Bahia's 27,000 military police officers walked out on Tuesday demanding salary increases and other benefits, as well as amnesty for police involved in a 2012 strike. The state government has said that it cannot afford to meet the demands, and a court ruled the walkout illegal and ordered the police back to work.

At a mass assembly Thursday, the police voted to continue the strike in defiance of the order. Later in the day, a settlement was announced, however, and there was an apparent agreement to return to work.

Schools and universities in the state were shut down after the police struck, and bus service ground to a virtual standstill after the union pulled out its drivers over safety concerns.

In greater Salvador, Bahia's largest city with a population of three million, there were 21 people reported killed on Wednesday. According to the state's Secretary of Public Safety, the average daily murder rate for last year stood at six.

"The military operation was authorized by President Dilma Rousseff based on the request from [Bahia] Governor Jaques Wagner," the defense ministry said in a statement Wednesday.

Rousseff herself confirmed her role on Twitter Thursday, writing, "I authorized the sending of federal troops to give support to public security and guarantee peace in Bahia. It is unacceptable for the security of the population of Bahia to remain at risk."

The troops, some 6,000 of them helmeted and in combat gear, carrying assault rifles, fanned out across the state, beginning to patrol streets Wednesday in

Bahia and in the city of Ilhéus in the south of the state. Military officials said that they would soon be deployed in Feira de Santana and Paulo Afonso in northeastern Bahia, and in Barreiras in the western part of the state.

The end to the walkout will not result in an immediate withdrawal of the troops from Bahia. The state's governor, Wagner, announced that they would remain in place until the middle of next week.

This is the hardly the only instance of the Rousseff government's use of military force to quell social tensions.

The PT government recently sent federal troops to participate in a full-scale military assault on the Maré complex in Rio de Janeiro, where 130,000 people live in 15 different *favelas* (Brazil's self-constructed slum communities). The sprawling shantytown occupies strategic real estate between Rio's international airport and the better-off Southern Zone, the center of tourism and the focal point of activity for the upcoming 2014 World Cup games, scheduled to begin in less than two months.

Some two thousand soldiers and marines together with sixteen armored vehicles, helicopter gunships and units of the elite Special Operations Battalion (BOPE) were used in the occupation, which claimed 16 lives and left eight wounded. At least 160 people were arrested.

Before launching the incursion, the security forces obtained a controversial "collective" warrant, allowing them to carry out dragnet searches throughout two of the favelas, invading house after house in search of suspects, arms and drugs.

A group of Maré residents issued a statement denouncing the invasion: "It is evident that those who use the machinery of war against their own population, such as the tanks that currently occupy our streets, are

not seeking dialogue, and even less so participation, and thus are by no means concerned about guaranteeing our most basic rights. Tanks and helicopters pointing their guns at us stand for much more than just violations of rights; they stand for a violation of any idea of a democratic state of rights. A military occupation is just beginning, and yet it has already failed in what it proclaims to be. It is apparent to us that it is just one more brute attack against territories of the urban poor.”

At least 1,500 militarized police are set to remain as part of a permanent occupation under a program known as UPP (Units of Pacification Police), which has been implemented in a number of favelas over the last six years, with Rio’s poorest residents subjected to military-style occupation and repression.

It is widely recognized that the program draws heavily on counter-insurgency tactics developed by the US military, with the same scenario of “clear, hold and build.” A secret December 2009 cable from the US consulate in Rio released to the public by WikiLeaks made this explicit. It concluded that the favela pacification program “shares some characteristics with US counter-insurgency doctrine and strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq.”

The UPP program has been concentrated largely in the south of the city, where the government is anxious to impose tight control over the poor to ensure security of both Rio’s wealthiest districts and the venues where most of the World Cup and 2016 events are scheduled.

In a related operation, heavily armed military police conducted a brutal eviction last week of some 5,000 poor and homeless people who had taken over the Telerj (defunct state telephone company) building in northern Rio, a property that had remained vacant for 20 years. Starting at 4 in the morning, the police used rubber bullets, tear gas and live ammunition to drive out families, leaving dozens wounded, including infants and children.

Left with no place to go—rents have doubled in the last two years in Rio—and having lost all their belongings, hundreds of the evicted families marched on city hall and camped out in front of the building, where they were again attacked by military police.

At the beginning of this month, President Rousseff formally marked the 50th anniversary of the US-backed coup that ushered in 21 years of military dictatorship.

Rousseff, who was jailed and tortured under the military regime, treated the experience as a thing of the past that Brazil had “overcome.”

In reality, as these recent events have shown, Brazil remains a highly militarized society in which armed force is routinely used to quell tensions generated by a level of social inequality that remains among the worst in the world, despite the PT government’s minimal assistance programs.

After a decade in power, the PT, which was hailed by pseudo-left organizations around the world as the new model for socialist politics, has indisputably proven itself a bourgeois party, dedicated to the defense of the interests of the Brazilian financial and manufacturing elite and the wealth of the top 1 percent against the masses of workers and oppressed.

To this end, it resorts with increasing frequency to a military apparatus that enjoys complete impunity. Thanks to the maintenance by PT governments of a blanket amnesty imposed at the end of the dictatorship, not a single one of those responsible for political murders, “disappearances,” wholesale torture and illegal imprisonments has been called to account for his crimes.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact