

Police killing of 10-year-old sparks protests in Brazil

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Brazil's military police Tuesday announced that eight of its officers have been relieved from active duty as the result of an investigation into the fatal shooting of Eduardo de Jesus Ferreira, a 10-year-old boy who was gunned down at the entrance to his home in the Rio de Janeiro *favela* (shantytown) of Alemão.

The April 2 shooting of the 10-year-old followed the killing of three other residents of Alemão in the course of the previous 24 hours, including Elizabeth Alves, a 41-year-old housewife felled by a bullet that hit her in the face after first tearing through the doorway of her home. Two other people were wounded by gunfire in the prolonged shooting spree by the police. These latest crimes by the police bring the number of people shot in Alemão since the year began to 23, including 11 dead and 12 wounded.

The latest killings triggered a series of angry protests, which were first met with renewed police violence, including the use of stun grenades and pepper spray against protesters, several of whom were beaten and arrested. Protesters retaliated with rocks and bottles.

Images of the body of the 10-year-old child sprawled in a pool of blood at his family's doorstep triggered widespread outrage, sparking protests in other nearby favelas and a march for "peace" in the wealthier beachside neighborhood of Copacabana.

A larger protest on April 4 at the entrance to the Alemão complex was held without clashes, with security forces evidently told to let up temporarily on the repression to avoid an explosion in Rio, one of the most socially polarized cities on the planet.

The demonstrators, who included the slain boy's parents, demanded the withdrawal of the so-called UPP (Police Pacification Unit) from the Alemão favela. These units were introduced as a virtual occupying army in 2008, with nearly 10,000 military police spread

across Rio's sprawling favelas. Their tactics are based upon the kind of counterinsurgency doctrine developed by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This was clearly evident in the response of the police to the shooting. Major Marcelo Cobrage, a coordinator of the UPPs, told the AFP news agency that it was the drug gangs who were responsible for the killings because they "are using the population as shields."

Far from meeting the protesters' demands, the government has responded by sending beefed-up units of Military Police into the favela, carrying automatic weapons and backed by armored cars.

Brazil's Workers Party President Dilma Rousseff declared her "solidarity" with the family of young Eduardo de Jesus Ferreira and called for those responsible for his death to be "identified and punished."

The investigation into the fatal shooting, however, is in the hands of the Military Police (PM), which is notorious for its cover-up of police crimes.

For example, in July 2013, the police tortured, murdered and "disappeared" Amarildo de Souza, a bricklayer and father of six children, who lived in the Rocinha favela. He was apparently killed because he was suspected of concealing information about drug gangs in the area. This murder also provoked widespread protests, but a number of the police who participated in the crime and its cover-up were never charged and continue their repressive activities in the favelas.

In the case of the Alemão killing, the police are claiming that the boy was struck by a "stray bullet" fired in the midst of a shootout with gang members. This version of events is contradicted by the child's mother, who said that only a single shot was fired, the one that blew off part of her son's skull. She and others

believe that the cop who fired the fatal shot mistook a cellphone the boy was playing with for a gun.

According to official figures, members of the Brazilian security forces are responsible for 11,197 killings between 2009 and 2013 alone. According to non-governmental group Brazilian Forum on Security, over the past five years, Brazilian police have killed more people than the police in the US have slain in the last 30 years. On average, six people are killed every day by Brazilian cops, a higher number than is recorded in some countries engulfed in civil war.

The latest wave of police killings has coincided with the intensification of the crisis of the Workers Party government of President Rousseff, who is attempting to push through a program of drastic austerity measures aimed at eliminating the government's budget deficit and winning the approval of Wall Street and the US credit rating agencies.

Polls have indicated that fully 90 percent of the Brazilian people oppose the austerity drive, while Rousseff's own approval rating has nose-dived to just 12 percent. The demand for austerity is being made as the government is engulfed in a massive corruption scandal over a system of bribes and kickbacks at the energy conglomerate Petrobras, which appears to have cost the state-owned company billions of dollars.

Meanwhile, Brazil is preparing for the 2016 Olympics, which are set to begin in August of next year. As with the World Cup held last year in the country, these preparations have involved major development projects that have entailed the forced eviction of favela residents and other oppressed layers from their homes to make way for new stadiums and other projects connected to the games. In many cases, these sports facilities will serve as a transition to turning these previously unprofitable lands into sites for new luxury housing developments.

It has been estimated that by the time the Olympics are over, some 100,000 Brazilians, overwhelmingly from the poorest sections of the population, will have been evicted from their homes.

There was a demonstration last week by residents of the Vila Autodromo, a favela to the south of Rio that has been in existence since 1967, but whose 600 families are being driven out of their homes. They are being demolished to make way for an Olympic Park, which many suspect will later be turned into luxury

apartment complexes. Residents carrying banners and banging pots occupied the road linking the southern suburb of Barra de Tijuca to Rio, gridlocking traffic.

It was the first of what are anticipated to be many protests over the expenditures for the Olympics amid cutbacks in vital social programs as well as the living standards of the broad mass of Brazilian working people.



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