

Over 100 inmates killed in wave of Brazilian prison massacres

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The new year has been marked by a series of prison riots in Brazil's far north, with at least 102 inmates killed by other prisoners in highly coordinated acts. The first massacre on January 2 involved a 17-hour prison riot in the city of Manaus, capital of the Amazonas state, and ended with the slaughter of 56 inmates in a gang battle.

At least 27 of the victims were decapitated by riot leaders. The police reportedly kept away from ending the riots until prisoners had negotiated a settlement, ostensibly in order to avoid another tragedy like the infamous Carandiru riot in which São Paulo's Military Police slaughtered 111 inmates in 1992.

Another riot at the nearby Purarequara Prisional Unit (UPP) left four dead. More than 200 prisoners are thought to have escaped from both complexes in a simultaneous prison break.

On January 4 a third riot resulted in two deaths by firearm during fights between inmates. Later, on early Friday, January 6, a fourth inmate riot resulted in the murder of another 33 inmates in the Monte Cristo Rural Penitentiary, in Boa Vista, the capital of the neighboring Roraima state.

A fifth riot left four dead in the Manaus prison, which had received prisoners who survived the January 2 massacre and were believed to have been involved in the first attack.

The wave of massacres exposes the criminal character of the Brazilian government's war on drugs, which is aimed at the country's overwhelmingly impoverished population. The government has sought to cover up the true cause of the massacres: illegal and inhumane conditions for inmates in the country's overcrowded prison system.

The Raimundo Vidal Pessoa jail, where the third massacre took place, had been deactivated in December

2016 by order of the oversight National Justice Council for human rights violations.

Federal authorities initially believed the Manaus riot was executed in order to cover up the murder of members of the criminal Capital's First Command (PCC) group, based in southeastern São Paulo. The PCC is South America's largest drug trafficking gang.

Under this theory, the massacres were part of a latent crime war which escalated dramatically last June when PCC "soldiers" murdered Jorge Rafaat Toumani, the drug lord of Brazil's border region with Paraguay, in a fight over control of drug routes leading from the Andes to ports connecting to European drug markets.

In the Manaus and Roraima cases, abundant evidence showed the "gang war" theory to be unlikely. The local public attorney's offices, charities and human rights organizations and family members of the dead have been quick to dismiss the authorities' claims, pointing out that many dead were not related to the PCC or the FDN but were sexual crime convicts, a particularly endangered population of inmates usually subjected to "crime tribunals" inside the prisons in the name of "crime morality." The state and federal governments have later admitted that at least half of the dead had no connection to the warring factions.

The government adopted this "gang war" theory to wash their hands of any responsibility for the particularly horrifying circumstances of yet another prison massacre in Brazil. The routine character of prison violence in the country is certainly one of the most brutalizing features of the country's social life, conditioned in every aspect by its vast social inequality.

The COMPAJ compound holds three times its nominal capacity of 450 inmates, a figure above the already dire national average of 100 percent of overpopulation. Brazil has a total of 620,000 inmates,

the world's fourth largest prison population. According to *Folha de S. Paulo*, just last October, the National Justice Council (CNJ) found the prison "terrible for any attempt at rehabilitation, with no education, health care, social assistance or legal council for inmates," an also routine conclusion of prison inspections. The COMPAJ is also a "pioneering experiment" of private management that the Michel Temer government declared as early as August 2016 should be expanded, according to *O Globo*.

The Roraima prison holds twice its capacity of 750 inmates, and had been visited in May 2016 by the Brazilian Bar Association (OAB). Among the most barbaric conditions found were open sewage systems and a virtual absence of health care. After the riot on Friday, a *Folha de S. Paulo* reporting team found that the so-called "kitchen wing" had been destroyed by a fire several years before and rebuilt as a shantytown, generating "private rights" over "rebuilt" cells under the gang-imposed "crime code" that dominates many prisons, creating further sources of conflicts among desperate inmates. The shantytown cubicles were reportedly sold to other inmates by those who were freed.

This dire picture extends all over the country. It is estimated that 40 percent of inmates in Brazil have not yet been convicted, being in indefinite "provisional" detention, a number almost the size of the prison overpopulation. According to OAB, in the case of the Roraima prison, a staggering 940 inmates are in "provisional" detention, and 180 of them have never even made a deposition on the circumstances of their arrests.

The most immediate reason for the overcrowding would be, according to a survey by the G1 news station, the approval in 2006 of the Drug Law that formalized Brazil's "war on drugs." Ostensibly designed to allow for the differentiation of drug trafficking and possession, it ended up increasing almost fivefold, from 31,000 to 138,000, the number of drug trafficking-related imprisonments.

The main mechanism for this massive repressive operation was the allowing in a large part for the corrupt, murderous and bigoted Military Police corps of each state to determine whether trafficking or possession was involved in any particular arrest. In 2015, G1 quoted the former National Justice Secretary

Pedro Abramovay as admitting that the "detention for drug-related crimes are today a mechanism for criminalizing poverty."

The appeal of these demagogic practices was further evidenced by the treatment given to the families of the dead who were left waiting for many days for news of the inmates and were subjected to a campaign of lies about the behavior, legal situation and conditions of the inmates.

Repressive policies responsible for mass incarceration are nonetheless set to deepen under the Temer presidency, the most right-wing in Brazil since the end of the US-backed military dictatorship. Temer's justice minister, Alexandre de Moraes, infamously declared in a press conference in August 2016 that the country needed "less research and more weapons" to fight crime, in a reference to the toothless involvement of social sciences experts in security policies during the Workers Party (PT) governments of Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff.

The declaration followed his nomination as justice minister after two years as head of São Paulo's Military Police, the deadliest in the country, which kills more people per year than all police departments in the United States combined, despite the fact that the US has 7.5 times more people than São Paulo.

Moraes's immediate response to the massacre was to announce the construction of new prisons to room 30,000 inmates and to suggest a law to make it more difficult for inmates to obtain probation.

Moraes's actions are only part of an unfolding assault on democratic rights after the right-wing campaign that removed Rousseff. In late September 2016, a regional appeals court in São Paulo annulled the sentences of 74 police officers found guilty of murder in the 1992 Carandiru prison massacre, the deadliest in the country's history.



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