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Rio De Janeiro, Brazil: Wave Of Riots & Looting

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According to police sources, between May 5 and 9, 21 supermarkets in Rio de Janeiro's Riachuelo, Jacare, Madureira and Tijuca suburbs were looted. Over the past month, 30 groceries in Rio were targeted in a wave of looting and food riots. Police have suggested the epidemic of supermarket looting was directed by drug traffickers to retaliate against authorities for a recent anti-narcotics operation. Most journalists and city officials say recent events are much more likely the result of deteriorating economic conditions in the slums (favelas). Gangs of looters attacked police with rocks and clubs in at least four of the supermarkets before security forces fired into the air and dispersed the crowds. At least seven people were injured in the May 5-9 period. Police arrested about 136 people, all slum residents who said they were simply passing by when the stores were being looted and decided to join in. Groups of slum residents organized an all-night demonstration on May 6 in different locations of northern Rio. Witnesses said the demonstrators chanted "we want food" and "we are hungry." In April 1990, 20 supermarkets in Rio de Janeiro were looted, about a month after President Fernando Collor de Mello implemented a harsh economic austerity program. According to daily newspaper O Dia, supermarket owners in Rio have organized a special security brigade of off-duty and retired military and police officers and private guards to protect their establishments. May 8: Former military president Joao Baptista Figueiredo attributed the wave of street violence and lootings on Collor administration policies and the "dictatorship of the congress." He said the only solution to the crisis was a "dramatic rupture" with the current system. May 9: Suspected drug traffickers opened fire on police pursuing a group of people who had looted a store in the Periferia neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro. The involvement of drug traffickers led police and President Collor de Mello to conclude that the lootings are not spontaneous actions by impoverished slum dwellers, but rather are organized by criminal gangs. [Sources: United Press International, 05/06/92; Inter Press Service, 05/07/92; Prensa Latina (Cuba), 05/08/92; Agence France-Presse, 05/05/92, 05/06/92, 05/09/92; Spanish news service EFE, 05/07-09/92]