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LADB Staff

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170 Dead in Prison-based Gang Wars

by LADB Staff

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The Brazilian city of Sao Paulo underwent several days of bloodshed as warfare between gangsters and police left more than 170 dead between May 12 and May 19. The violence began after prison authorities attempted to isolate leaders of the prison gang Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) by moving them from local jails and sending them to a more remote and secure detention center. Street warfare and multiple prison rebellions led to the bloodiest days in the city's history and paralyzed movement within Brazil's largest metropolis.

Riots in over 70 jails, nearly 200 street attacks

An effort to move 765 PCC members, including eight gang leaders, to a maximum-security facility sparked the weeklong street war in Sao Paulo, the nation's industrial and financial center of 22 million inhabitants. Gang leaders used cell phones that had been smuggled into the jails to coordinate rebellions in over 70 prisons and street attacks focused mostly on the city's Policia Militar (PM). By the time the bulk of the fighting was over, authorities reported 170 deaths: 41 police and prison officers, 107 "suspected criminals," 18 inmates, and four civilians. There was, however, some fluctuation in the numbers of casualties reported, leading human rights groups to express suspicions about police assassinations following the wave of attacks. Masked assailants attacked bars, banks, and police stations with machine guns while inmates at dozens of prisons took guards hostage.

Between May 12 and 16, police reported 181 attacks. Nine bus companies, whose fleet of 5,100 buses accounted for more than a third of the city's total, halted service on May 15 after attacks destroyed 51 buses. Armed gang members reportedly boarded buses, ordered passengers off, and torched the vehicles. The city of Sao Paulo sent two cars with two guards equipped with bulletproof vests to each of the city's 23 bus terminals and stationed guards on main avenues, according to the mayor's office.

"What happened in Sao Paulo was a provocation, a demonstration of organized crime's strength," President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva told reporters in Brasilia on May 15. When the uprising first began, Lula was in Europe attending a summit of European and Latin American leaders. Sao Paulo's banking union, the country's biggest union, said 18 branches in Sao Paulo were shut after being attacked by the criminal gangs.

Sao Paulo's Roman Catholic Archbishop Claudio Hummes said the government had not done enough to stop the violence by the PCC. "Society cannot accept being held hostage by criminals," he said. "The state must improve the prison system to stop it from being a school for crime." Thousands of bus drivers refused to work May 15, leaving an estimated 2.9 million people scrambling to find a way to their jobs. The city's normally clogged downtown streets were largely free of traffic that morning, but Sao Paulo had one of its worst evening traffic jams ever as workers tried to get home before nightfall. Worried parents kept children out of school and many businesses shut by 4 p.m.

"We're scared," said Cristina Freitas, a ticket seller at a cinema preparing for an early shutdown. "And who wouldn't be with everything that's going on? It's just a good idea to get out of here early." Gilson Adei, 35, driving one of the few buses in downtown Sao Paulo, demanded authorities lash back at the criminals. "It's absurd; the gang members can do whatever they want? They can just start a war? And why would they attack the transportation, normal people? Next it will be schools," he said. The federal government offered to send 4,000 troops to support the state forces, which by law are those charged with the state's security. But Claudio Lembo, the acting governor, declined the offer, calling it unnecessary and arguing that the violence was "under control."

Earlier this year federal troops fought drug gangs in the favelas, or slums, in Rio de Janeiro. Second PCC-led "megarebellion" in 5 years The PCC was originally formed in response to a massacre of rioting prisoners by Sao Paulo's PM in 1992, leaving 111 inmates of the city's Carandiru prison dead (see NotiSur, 1992-10-06, 1992-10-13, 1992-12-15). An official investigation said the PM committed "excesses" that led to the massacre, including the murder of inmates who had already surrendered and were in their cells. Subsequently, 120 PM agents were prosecuted for murder, attempted murder, and assault, including police Col. Ubiratan Guimaraes (see NotiSur, 1993-02-02, 1993-03-09, 2001-07-06, 2002-05-24). In 2001, the PCC also used cell phones to coordinate a megarebellion that enveloped 29 prisons with nearly 30,000 inmates and resulted in a 27-hour siege with 7,000 hostages taken.

In 2002, the Carandiru prison was finally shut down, although it did little to relieve Brazil's prison system of its chronic overcrowding and violence (see 2002-09-20). Since its founding, the criminal syndicate has grown to an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 members and maintains a dues-paying system and statutes that are brutally enforced. PCC members also coordinated the May 2006 uprising with cell phones that had been smuggled into the prison, leading authorities to attempt to block cellular phone transmissions in the area of the jails.

Brazilian lawmakers decided to vote later that week on 30 measures to beef up security and reduce the influence of gang leaders who maintain control from behind bars. The bills would let authorities keep gang leaders in solitary confinement for as long as two years up from the current one year. The proposed legislation would also fund a nationwide prison-intelligence agency and would require cellular telephone service providers to block cell phone signals inside prisons.

But President Lula's government said Congress should not rush into legislation. He said Brazil did not spend enough on education from the 1960s through the 1990s, condemning men now in their 20s and 30s to lives of crime instead of giving them a future. He said he prefers to spend more on schools than on prisons. "Either we give hope to these youths or organized crime will do it for us," said Lula. "I prefer that people work, earning their pay day to day with their sweat to win this battle against organized crime." But many Sao Paulo residents say the gang problems are the result of corrupt and poorly paid police, a judicial system that does not mete out harsh punishment, and decades of failure by politicians to deal with the problem.

Maria Jose Belo, a 50-year-old secretary, said the cycle of violence would simply continue if nothing were changed. "Violence only brings more violence," she said. "I think this is just revenge. Now the police have an excuse to kill gang members."

Accusations of indiscriminate reprisal killings by police

Many more "suspects" than police were dead by the end of the week of violence, leading some human rights groups to conjecture that the PM were carrying out extrajudicial assassinations. Human rights groups have accused police of targeting innocent civilians as they avenge the killing of their officers. The head of the PM, Col. Elizeu Clair Teixeira, denied that any innocent people have been killed.

BBC reporter Steve Kingstone in Sao Paulo said that, as attacks on the police fell, the number of suspects shot by officers rose sharply. In less than a week the Sao Paulo police shot dead 107 people, almost the same as the number of fatal shootings in the first three months of the year. The victims were described as suspects, but few details had emerged and many of the dead had yet to be identified. Human rights advocates said there was evidence that rogue officers indiscriminately shot at civilians, especially in poorer areas of Sao Paulo.

"At this moment we are facing a sort of explosion. Police in their cars with their guns are going to poor neighborhoods and facing people with a face like criminals and shooting them," said lawyer Carlos Veiss. Col. Teixeira rejected such claims in an interview with the daily Folha de Sao Paulo newspaper and said there was no evidence of the police using excessive force. "Not so far. All the deaths happened during counterattacks by the police. This is clear from the incident reports," he said.

Acting Gov. Lembo also denied security forces were out of control. He said they were acting within limits and with restraint. The state attorney general said he would investigate every death.

Political implications for presidential race?

There were conjectures that Lula might face some campaign liability as he prepares to announce his re-election bid for the October vote (see NotiSur, 2006-03-24), but his closest opponents seem to be experiencing more political cost in the aftermath of the PCC-PM war in Sao Paulo. "This will have a nationwide impact because many other cities in Brazil have had waves of violent attacks," said David Fleischer, a political scientist at the Universidade de Brasilia. "Brazilians are very conscious about how violence can affect their daily lives." But Lula's main opponent, former Sao Paulo state Gov. Geraldo Alckmin, is also taking heat for failing in his five years in office to stamp out the PCC in the country's most populous state.

Both sides are likely to use television images of buses torched by gang members, police cruisers riddled with bullets, and funerals of both police officers and innocents caught in the crossfire in later attack ads. But Lula's lead in a poll taken during the street war widened in May as higher employment and wages boosted his popularity among voters.

Lula's lead over Alckmin, of the opposition Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), widened to 21.8% in May from 16.9% in April, according to a survey by Belo Horizonte-based Instituto Sensus released May 24. Lula, 60, would beat Alckmin by 40.5% to 18.7% in a first round of voting, the poll

indicated. In a separate list in which former Rio de Janeiro Gov. Anthony Garotinho of the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB) was not included, Lula's support rises to 42.1%, while Alckmin's would be 19.3%. The PMDB has not officially nominated a candidate yet. Lula would take 48.8% to Alckmin's 31.3% in a runoff, the poll showed.

Lula's personal popularity rating rose to 53.9% in May from 53.6% in April and 53.3% in February, Sensus said. Sensus surveyed 2,000 Brazilians in 195 municipalities from May 18 through May 21. The margin of error was plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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