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## **Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires Build Walled Communities**

*by LADB Staff*

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Widening economic differences among inhabitants of major Southern Cone countries, and the accompanying feeling of insecurity in the wealthiest sectors of society, have pushed some governments and some citizen groups in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Buenos Aires, Argentina, to try out extreme solutions that fail to address the root of the problem and are clearly discriminatory.

The two cities' influence on Montevideo, capital of Uruguay, has caused previously unknown, or in any event dormant, sentiments to flourish. The solution that the three cities imagine will bring the paradise of security is always the same: build high concrete walls to separate the meticulous neighborhoods of the rich from the disorderly barrios of the poor.

That policy of separating, of dividing, which has been imposed for other motives and with varying results in various parts of the world, began to be applied in early April in the beautiful touristic city of Rio de Janeiro. The local government has set aside US\$22 million to construct a 14.6 km long, 3 meter high wall, which will encircle 13 favelas. These poor neighborhoods were built spontaneously on the hillsides that ring the city and gave birth to the famous samba schools that bring delight and give a unique prestige to the Carnaval celebration in the former Brazilian capital.

In 1961, the administrative seat of government was moved to Brasilia, a city built specifically for that purpose. The Rio government said officially that the purpose of the walls was strictly environmental, that they were being built to prevent the favelas from spreading toward the Bosque Atlantico and into the Selva de Tijuca, designated by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a World Biosphere Reserve.

The daily newspaper O Globo was skeptical of the explanation and said that Rio de Janeiro state Gov. Sergio Cabral is a longtime enemy of the poor who never hesitates to call favelas "large criminal factories." Acclaimed Brazilian journalist Eric Nepomuceno followed that same line of reasoning in an article for the Argentine daily Pagina 12, in which he wrote, "Cabral has long defended the 'total confrontation' policy against crime, which has resulted in legalizing the 'trigger happy' (gatillo facil) police policy of shoot first, ask questions later, with dozens of favela dwellers killed in 'confrontations' that never occurred; in other words, assassinated in cold blood."

### ***Favela residents question environmental justifications***

No one questions the governor's environmental reasons. Tijuca, an enclave in the middle of the city, is a tropical forest so decimated for decades that only 7% of its original area remains. Nature experts say that Tijuca, though less well-known than the Amazon, contains greater biodiversity, including 1,020 species of birds, 350 of fish, 340 of amphibians, 251 of mammals, and 197 of reptiles. Not only do they not question the official project, but they would be in favor of any plan to protect the area.

But many doubt Cabral's arguments, and not just because of his history. They are also suspicious because the walls are being built in favela areas that have not expanded but happen to be nearest the richest neighborhoods and most touristic areas of Rio: Tijuca, Leblon, Ipanema, and Copacabana. The government's Instituto Municipal de Urbanismo Pereira Passos says the area covered by favelas increased 6.88% between 1999 and 2008, but those chosen for the wall project grew a total of only 1.18%.

On Dona Marta hill, where construction of the first wall was begun, there was even a .99% reduction in occupied area. Favelas are the biggest exclusion areas in Rio de Janeiro and in all of Brazil's major cities. They are violent areas where everything is irregular and where the state is absent. Nepomuceno says, "Almost everyone is under the control of drug traffickers or the militia. Both control alternative transportation, gas distribution, cable TV installation, stolen electricity networks, security for shopkeepers, and the sale and rental of property (some buildings are as high as 10 stories). Both authorize meetings, sponsor weddings and funerals, distribute medicine and toys, celebrate fiestas, and control the transit of people and vehicles. They are the state in areas abandoned by public authority."

The authorities say that only marginalized people live in the favelas, "but that is a big lie," said Nandson Ribeiro, an IT technician with a good income but not good enough to buy or rent an apartment in a country that has a housing deficit of 8 million units. Ribeiro told Inter Press Service, "Public power forgot the favelas, and here good people are hostages of drug-trafficking gangs or a corrupt and out of control police. The favela inhabitant is held hostage by the state's abandonment."

Ribeiro supports preserving the natural forest, as does the Federacao das Associacoes de Moradores de Favelas. But he asks that there be a public debate to determine what actions should be undertaken. "So, as the governor wants, favelas are already living under siege. The wall will be a symbol of prejudices and discrimination," said federation president Antonio Ferreira de Melo.

In the 21st century, in the middle of a huge city, Ferreira gave another reason why residents reject Cabral's plans. "The wall is going to keep children from going to the forest to collect fruit and keep homemakers from getting their water there," he said.

### *Another city, another wall*

While the wall project goes forward in Rio, in Buenos Aires construction of the first wall has begun on the outskirts of the city. Responding to the demand of 33 powerful families who live in the exclusive La Horqueta section of San Isidro, mayor Gustavo Posse ordered construction of a concrete and iron-bar wall 1.5 km long and 3 meters high to prevent the 8,000 inhabitants of Villa Teresa, a working-class barrio, from passing through their neighborhood. "That will be the only way to keep thieves from entering our houses," said the petition taken to Posse by San Isidro residents.

The idea was short-lived. The first 100 meters had barely been completed when hundreds of Villa Teresa neighbors tore down what had just been put up. The national government, the Ministry of Justice, and the Instituto Nacional contra la Discriminacion (INADI) harshly criticized Posse and La Horqueta residents. "If it had been done, this work would represent discrimination by the most repugnant classes in the city," said Maria Jose Lubertino, head of INADI.

The aborted San Isidro wall shed light on a similar segregation action that had remained out of the public eye for several months. In Ensenada, 60 km south of Buenos Aires, in place of an upright barrier, a 1 km long, 2 meter deep trench was built on the pretext of preventing robberies the project's backers said were committed by residents of a poor barrio with the highest unemployment rate (21%) in the area south of the Argentine capital.

### *On to Montevideo*

The wave of discrimination crossed the border and arrived in Montevideo. During a campaign event in the Cerrito neighborhood, 5 km from the center of the Uruguayan capital, Partido Blanco (PB) presidential precandidate Jorge Larranaga took advantage of the crowd's receptivity to his message to say that if he won in the October elections, he planned to implement "mano dura" (hard-line) treatment of criminals, for which he would create a militarized guard, with thousands of members, so that Montevideans would not suffer from insecurity. In that context, a neighborhood shopkeeper, who said he had been a frequent victim of thieves, called for "zero tolerance" and for "constructing walls to separate good people from criminals."

The Blanco candidate said that was a possibility and promised that he would think about what the man said. He did not say he opposed constructing walls. The government discounted the suggestion, and the governing Frente Amplio said that building walls "is discriminatory and out and out fascist."

In light of the tendencies expressed by these minorities, but backed by certain government officials and leaders, Argentine academic Marta Bekerman asked, "Is this the type of society that we want to build?" And, she responded, "If the answer to that is no, we must urgently think about all those policies that would, after ending exclusion, permit us to tear down walls and build bridges that bring people closer together."

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