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Rio’s Favelas See Uptick in Violence

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For decades, the favelas of Rio de Janeiro have suffered the stigma of violence as their residents suffered in the crosshairs of the armed conflict between government security forces and narco-trafficking organizations. In recent years, that situation has improved significantly with the implementation of the Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora (UPP) program, which invades favelas with overwhelming military force to evict drug gangs and then installs a permanent police presence. However, a late April incident in which a dancer on a popular television program and resident of the Pavão-Pavãozinho favela, near Copacabana, died in UPP custody is only the latest in a string of high-profile cases that have cast serious doubts about the efficacy, transparency, and legality of the military police in Rio de Janeiro state, which manage and staff the UPP program.

The death of the dancer, Douglas Rafael da Silva Pereira (known by his nickname, DG), prompted intense protests on the streets of Pavão-Pavãozinho and Copacabana. Such a response echoed the refrain Cadê o Amarildo? (Where is Amarildo?) that featured in last year’s protests following the July 2013 disappearance of Amarildo Dias de Souza, a mason’s assistant, at the hands of the UPP in the Rocinha favela, Rio’s largest.

In March, President Dilma Rousseff was moved to publicly denounce the death of Claudia da Silva Ferreira when military police abducted her during an operation and put her in the trunk of their car, which later opened, spilling her onto the street.

The city of Rio de Janeiro is known as much for its natural wonders and famous landmarks as it is for its favela communities, the informal settlements that dot the hilly landscape. A topic long known to Brazilians, where police-versus-gang shootouts in favelas are a fixture of the nightly news, films like the 2002 Oscar-nominated City of God vaulted the issue to international prominence. Consequently, even as victims of recent police violence are overwhelmingly low-income Cariocas (residents of Rio) who live in favelas, the impending World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympic Games have raised the issue of Rio’s security situation to one of global significance.

Case of DG galvanizes outcry about UPP policies

On the afternoon of April 22, DG was found dead inside a municipal school in the Pavão-Pavãozinho community where he lived. While details remain unclear about the order of events, it appears that police escorted DG to UPP headquarters in the community. Following the discovery of his body, police claimed that he had died in a fall. Family members disputed the claim given that he was in a defensive position when discovered, and a forensics team located bullet casings at the site. DG was a dancer on the popular, nationally broadcast television show Esquenta, a factor that has boosted the case’s profile.

Elizabeth Leeds, senior fellow at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) and co-founder and honorary president of the Brazilian Forum for Public Safety, explains, "Esquenta’s target audience is low-income, but its host—Regina Casé—has a national presence and has the capacity to mobilize support throughout the country."
To that extent, outrage over the event quickly spread not only to localized protests in Pavão-Pavãozinho and neighboring Copacabana but also in online, print, and televised media. DG’s mother publicly declared, "The UPP is a farce, a lie. My son did not die from a fall. I am certain that the police tortured and killed him. His death will not be in vain, I am going to sue the state."

The UPP program began in 2008 as an initiative by the state government of Rio, which has jurisdiction over security policy. There are currently 39 UPPs spread across Rio. Initially, the UPP was received to great acclaim. A 2010 survey of favela residents indicated 92% and 77% approval rates from favela residents in communities with and without the UPP, respectively. O Globo, the leading Brazilian media outlet, named José Beltrame, state secretary of security and architect of the UPP program, Personality of the Year in 2011.

However, the recent setbacks that the UPP has suffered are beginning to chip away at its prestige, in part because the policing program, inspired by a similar effort in Medellín, Colombia, lacks a comprehensive social component, essential to the successful Medellín model. Leeds argues, "The UPPs had tremendous potential when they began but the complementary UPP Social, which was to accompany the implantation of the UPPs, never happened. Little of the physical upgrading, job training, and health and education service improvement ever happened."

**Military police’s history intertwined with Brazil’s dictatorship**

The state of Rio has both civil and military police, and the latter are responsible for the UPP program. Moreover, the police were a central element of the military dictatorship that governed Brazil from 1964 until the return to democracy in the 1980s. Julia Tierney, an urban-planning researcher at the University of California-Berkeley, who published a report on the UPP in 2012, explains, "The police were the institution that least changed with Brazilian democratization, and their violence is a reflection of this militarization during the dictatorship and even longer role as a tool of social control over the poor."

Based on her research, Tierney continues, "I think there are genuine interests from inside the military police to reform, to democratize (which I understood to mean be less repressive), but a 200-year institution doesn't change overnight, and especially not with the pressure of the mega events."

The irony is that the UPP program is considered a lynchpin of Rio’s security strategy precisely to prepare for the mega sporting events of 2014 and 2016. However, those very events are one of the largest obstacles to any meaningful reform. As José Beltrame told O Globo in a December 2013 interview on the fifth anniversary of UPP when asked about police killings, "The issue is that the train can't stop. We have to fix the tracks while it's already running."

Thus the state government is struggling not only to reform the institution of the military police, but also to respond to the shifting geography of drug trafficking that has resulted from the UPP’s displacement of gangs from their traditional strongholds. With armed factions largely removed from the favelas of the affluent Zona Sul and Tijuca, the business district around Centro, and many areas of the working-class Zona Norte and Zona Oeste, drug traffic has moved outside the city of Rio to municipalities on the urban periphery.

"Public safety policies have been slow to respond to the new ‘reorganized’ crime," Leeds says. She points to the most recent statistics by the Instituto de Segurança Pública of the state of Rio, which for the first trimester of 2014 show a sharp rise in violent deaths and street crime, approaching 2008
levels before UPP began. Despite these setbacks, in light of the calendar, Leeds is not optimistic. "I do not believe the recent events necessarily indict the UPPs, but I do not see the political will to undertake the necessary adjustments happening in the context of the mega events, especially the World Cup," she says.

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