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Brazil's Largest City Cracks Down on Downtown Drug Market, Prompting Human Rights Complaints

by Gregory Scruggs

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Cracolândia, the nickname given to an open-air drug market in downtown São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, is the new target of ire for Mayor João Doria, of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (Brazilian Social Democratic Party, PSDB). In May, he ordered a large-scale police operation to clean up the one-block maze of makeshift tents and stalls where drug users buy, sell, and barter for marijuana, powder cocaine, and especially crack cocaine just a few hundred meters from the city's ornate symphony hall.

Human rights defenders protested the armed effort to dismantle the drug bazaar, insisting that treatment programs from the previous mayoral administration are more effective than criminalizing drug use. They intend to prepare a dossier against the mayor, who was elected last year, and deliver it to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR), a judicial body under the Organization of American States (OAS). In the wake of the early-morning police invasion, dubbed Projeto Redenção (Project Redemption), Doria declared that Cracolândia was "finished," although media reports confirmed that public consumption of illicit drugs persisted in the vicinity of the crackdown.

Downtown São Paulo has played home to some version of a Cracolândia since at least 2005. The market has stubbornly survived the best efforts of several mayors who have attempted both public health outreach strategies and more hardline tactics such as Doria's.

Open arms vs. redemption

In the early hours of May 21, as revelers wound down from the annual Virada Cultural, an all-night cultural program in downtown São Paulo, approximately 900 police officers stormed a small block in the downtown core. With a barrage of smoke bombs, they swooped in on the remnants of a typical Saturday night, crack-fueled party in Cracolândia. By the end of the operation, the police had arrested 53 people, 51 of whom were suspected of drug trafficking. Police seized 12 kg of crack, two credit card machines, and R\$50,000 (US\$15,157) in cash.

Doria, a right-wing politician who has rejected many of the policies of his leftist predecessor, Fernando Haddad of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party, PT) ([NotiSur, Nov. 11, 2016](#)), seized on the blitz. "Cracolândia here is finished; it's not coming back," he said as he strolled the block after the raid. "Neither the city nor state governments will permit this. This area will be liberated from any more circumstances like these. As of today, that's the past."

But according to Folha de São Paulo, just blocks away from Doria's victory lap, crack addicts were openly consuming drugs.

Human rights advocates focused on this juxtaposition to argue that Doria's Projeto Redenção was already a failure, and one with serious human collateral damage. "Last Sunday's actions, which became even more serious in the following days, are unacceptable for their truculence and

illegality,” read a statement from the Instituto Pólis, a São Paulo-based NGO. In the wake of the anti-drug operation, residents of the area reported illegal searches and seizures, violence at the hands of police, and indiscriminate use of force even against those who were not in possession of, or using, drugs. Under Projeto Redenção, the city government also began forcibly detaining drug users for compulsory treatment.

Public health advocates decried this approach to drug use as compared to Haddad’s De Braços Abertos (With Open Arms) program. Modeled on harm-reduction policies used in Canada, Holland, Portugal, and Uruguay, the program emphasized voluntary treatment and the classification of drug addiction as a public health rather than criminal issue. Doria announced the elimination of De Braços Abertos early in his mandate, which began Jan. 1.

“A fascist approach of exclusion and abandonment,” fumed Rogério Sottili, who served as Haddad’s municipal secretary of human rights, after the May raid. “We’re going back to a situation that we already know, to a mindset that’s going to make things worse without solving the problem. The people that are taken away from there [Cracolândia] are going to return, it’s the only place they know.” Sottili called on activists, drug counselors, doctors, crime specialists, and NGOs to organize a resistance to Projeto Redenção, with calls for formal complaints to the IACHR.

São Paulo State Governor Geraldo Alckmin of the PSDB is a trained physician and appeared to adopt the language of those who favor a harm-reduction approach. “Drug addiction is no different than appendicitis. You have to treat the patient,” he said. But his endorsement of Projeto Redenção squandered any good will with advocates for the public health approach. On May 24, he and Doria attempted to announce new affordable housing in the neighborhood, an effort to stabilize an area of abandoned buildings and illegal squatter occupations, but were shouted down with accusations of “fascists” and higienistas, a term Brazilians sometimes use in reference to ethnic cleansing.

From Cracolândia to Nova Luz

Later that day, the São Paulo public defender successfully secured a judicial stay on some aspects of the program before future state incursions into Cracolândia. Going forward, police must provide advanced notice of their activity, adequate time for people residing in the area to remove their personal belongings, trucks to move personal effects if police intends to demolish temporary structures, and social workers who will monitor and assist during any removal operations. Given that many of the people found in Cracolândia at any given hour of the day are homeless, the judicial order also requires the state to provide them with housing should they be swept up in raids.

Despite the judicial order, the raids persist, fueled by an infusion of cash from the federal government. On June 9, the administration of embattled President Michel Temer, who is also a member of the PSDB, announced R\$25 (US\$7.58) million for Projeto Redenção. On June 11, police staged another 6 a.m. Sunday raid at a nearby plaza where Cracolândia had migrated after the May incident. They seized 774 grams of drugs and R\$1,600 (US\$485).

“This is a permanent effort, not something that will be resolved from one day to the next,” said Alckmin in the type of early-morning, post-raid press conference that has become routine. “We can’t have a concentration [of drug activity] because that makes life easier for drug traffickers and harder to deal with.” Fellow PSDB member Doria added, “There will be no retreat. We will continue to move forward on the medical, social, and urban redevelopment fronts.”

The mayor used the opportunity to announce plans to revitalize the neighborhood, formally known as Luz, with the installation of affordable housing, a nursery, a hospital, and a job training center. He indicated that such efforts would come in the form of public-private partnerships.

With easy access to the São Paulo subway and proximity to major cultural institutions like the São Paulo symphony orchestra and the Pinacoteca art museum, the Luz neighborhood has been the subject of redevelopment schemes for over a decade. Former Mayor Gilberto Kassab of the Partido Social Democrático (Social Democratic Party, PSD) announced the Projeto Nova Luz (Project New Luz) in 2005, a major makeover for the once-vibrant, now down-on-its-heels sector that envisioned an enlivened neighborhood akin to fashionable Las Ramblas in Barcelona.

Private real estate interests were expected to invest heavily in the neighborhood, which had fallen on hard times after government offices and businesses moved elsewhere in the city in the 1960s. But critics called Projeto Nova Luz a giveaway to real estate developers that did not respect affordable housing legislation designating the area as a zone of “special social interest,” and Haddad shelved it upon taking office in 2013. Doria, meanwhile, has reopened the possibility of intense redevelopment downtown. “For as long as I’m mayor, Cracolândia will not exist. Now it’s Nova Luz,” he said.

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