

Rio slum fighting for peace

Tue March 16, 2004 08:18 AM ET

By Andrei Khalip

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil (Reuters) - Rocinha, one of Rio de Janeiro's largest slums, was for years also one of the calmest in this crime-ridden Brazilian city.

Now the sprawling hillside shantytown, whose lights make the mountain look like a Christmas tree at night, is praying for peace after weeks of fear and violence caused by gang turf wars and police invasions.

Police say an all-out conflict between battalions of gangsters with assault rifles, one stationed inside Rocinha and the other preparing to invade, can happen any minute.

Groups of tough-looking policemen, submachine guns at hand, stand at the entrances to Rocinha, at times fishing out mainly young men from a human stream for searches and checks.

Last month, three youths were killed, execution-style, in a police operation aimed at preventing a rumoured confrontation.

At least one of them had nothing to do with drug trafficking, prompting slum dwellers to stage a protest, shutting a tunnel linking the beachside Leblon neighbourhood and upscale Barra de Tijuca.

Such protests have become commonplace in Rio in response to heavy-handed police tactics, criticised on many occasions by human rights organisations such as Amnesty International.

This time Rocinha's residents association managed to contain popular anger.

"It negotiated with the authorities that there would be no repressive action by police crack forces for 60 days," said anthropologist Rubem Cesar Fernandes, head of Viva Rio social and human rights group working in "favelas", or slums. "We have a truce for another 50 days."

Over that time, Rocinha and the authorities have to come up with a more friendly policing scheme to substitute the present exclusion of slums from regularly policed areas and rare military-style invasion operations by the police.

"Police should understand that their role is not repression but crime prevention, and the state has to make it a priority," said Carlos Costa, a Viva Rio security coordinator and Rocinha resident.

"It won't happen overnight, but we defend this idea."

According to various estimates, between 100,000 and 300,000 people -- most of them honest workers whose sweat makes the city below go round -- live in the slum's unsightly, red-brick or cement-gray shacks that tower on top of each other.

DUDU WANTS LULU'S DRUG TRADE BACK

Their fates lie in the hands of only a few people with cartoon character-like names such as Dudu and Lulu.

It started when Fernandinho Beira-Mar (Freddy Seashore), a jailed drug lord associated with Rio's ruthless Red Command criminal organisation, tried to make Rocinha the centre of his empire last year and sent a representative there.

"He wanted to install a Colombian cartel model, with one "capo" (boss), but from what we know, the local kingpin turned the representative in to the police," Fernandes told Reuters, sipping a beer in the middle of a crooked, smelly slum street.

That first Rocinha coup d'etat attempt ended without much trouble but it was only a beginning as Red Command no longer trusted Rocinha's boss Luciano Barbosa, or Lulu.

In January, mob boss Eduino de Araujo, known as Dudu, who used to control the drug trade in Rocinha before 1997, escaped from prison and has tried to reclaim the territory from Lulu.

While Lulu was at peace with everyone, Rocinha became a relatively safe place for Rio standards, even visited by tourists on special day-time excursions.

Rio has one of the highest murder rates of any city in the world -- about 44 per 100,000 people.

Rocinha has developed a strong community leadership that carries out social work. Recently, smart-looking blocks of flats with five stories and more started popping up there.

The slum is also a busy commercial spot, where even people from richer areas sometimes go to buy cheap construction materials or tools on weekends. It has an electric appliances store and even a McDonald's ice cream shop.

But now, police say Dudu has a host of several hundred men in the adjacent areas, while Lulu's 400-500 heavily-armed footsoldiers are ready to repel any attack that would certainly leave many innocent people dead.

"Dudu is rapidly losing credibility with gangs from other slums, but a clash is still a possibility," said Marina Maggesi, head of police intelligence coordination."

"If it happens, it will be a bloodbath in the South Zone," she said, referring to the smart, beachside part of Rio, which also homes Rocinha.

© Reuters 2004. All rights reserved. Users may download and print extracts of content from this website for their own personal and non-commercial use only. Republication or redistribution of Reuters content, including by framing or similar means, is expressly prohibited without the prior written consent of Reuters. Reuters and the Reuters sphere logo are registered trademarks or trademarks of the Reuters group of companies around the world.



[Close This Window](#)