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Rio de Janeiro state plans to wall off slums

By Raymond Colitt in So Paulo

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The government of Rio de Janeiro state yesterday proposed to build a wall around its sprawling *favelas* in an effort to help control rampant crime in the picture postcard city.

"The wall won't put an end to violence [in the slums] but if we don't contain it, it will destroy the [surrounding] forest, the economy of Rio de Janeiro and the lives of the city's residents," Luiz Paulo Conde, deputy governor, said on Monday.

The proposal comes after yet another wave of violence rocked parts of the city during the Easter holidays, shutting down commerce, and killing 10 people, including civilians, police and gang members.

More than 1,200 police officials on Monday occupied Rocinha and Vidigal, two slums in southern Rio de Janeiro, only a stone's throw from the city's famous beaches. Their patrols will seek to re-establish public order.

The unrest broke out when a rival gang on Friday sought to invade and occupy Rocinha, Latin America's largest shantytown, in an attempt to control the drug trade and steal cars.

The episode illustrates not only the power of drug traffickers in Rio but also the ineffectiveness of the police. Hidden TV cameras have repeatedly filmed police officials and prison guards turning a blind eye on drug traffickers and even taking bribes from them. Parts of Rocinha at the weekend resembled a battlefield.

Drug gangs armed with grenades and machine guns, fired relentlessly and local residents were caught in the crossfire.

One woman was killed late on Friday as she tried to break through a roadblock set up by gang members and one man was killed on his porch early on Monday by a stray bullet.

Several inhabitants abandoned the neighbourhood with their belongings.

"I can't stay here any more, the police are not in control," said one resident.

The military police, subordinate to the state governor, defended its performance, saying violence would have been much worse had it not intervened.

Cesar Maia, the city's mayor, on Monday harshly criticised Rosinha Matheus, the governor, and Anthony Garotinho, her husband and secretary for public security.

Mr Maia urged the federal government to help re-establish order and said state security forces had proved "entirely incompetent".

The state government proposes to build three-metre tall concrete walls around at least four slums. "We can no longer watch passively, it needs to be built urgently," said Mr Conde.

He rejected criticism that the project would in effect segregate residents and insisted the government would finance infrastructure projects, including water and sewage services.

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