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Rio police storm two slums to halt deadly drug battles

By Michael Astor
The Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil — More than 1,000 police stormed into two Rio shantytowns yesterday, attempting to halt a violent dispute among drug traffickers that has left at least 10 people dead.

Automatic-weapons fire crackled as police swept through the Rocinha favela, or slum, and the nearby Vidigal slum, both of which overlook the city's wealthiest neighborhoods and trendy beaches.

The drug-war violence that erupted Friday has alarmed tourists and vacationers. The respected O Globo newspaper said guests at the beachfront Intercontinental Hotel were shocked to see red and blue tracer bullets streaking across the night sky.

"We're going to tighten the belt around the favela more and more. We're going to push them deeper and deeper, point by point, and soon we'll have the area totally controlled," said Rio state police Col. Renato Hottz, who is in charge of the operation.

Meanwhile, drug gangs fired on a helicopter that was flying over a slum on the city's north side, injuring two police officers and forcing an emergency landing, the state security office said. Police said the shooting was unrelated to the crackdown in Vidigal and Rocinha.

The drug war broke out when gang members from Vidigal attempted to invade Rocinha to wrest control of the narcotics trade, mainly cocaine and marijuana. Sporadic shootouts between drug gangs and police have erupted since then, and the violence in the slums — which straddle the main roads dividing the city's south and west sides — cut Rio in two.

On Friday, a female motorist was killed in the crossfire between the two gangs. Two other bystanders also were killed, while police said the remaining victims were drug traffickers.

Many of Rocinha's 56,000 residents fled to avoid the violence. The slum, which is usually relatively calm despite its thriving drug trade, is the largest of Rio's 600-plus shantytowns.

Rio's mayor César Maia criticized state police officials yesterday and called for federal intervention to help keep the peace.

"I think the federal government should consider declaring a state of alert in Rio de Janeiro; the state security department has shown itself incapable of controlling the situation," Maia said.

Justice Minister Márcio Thomaz Bastos said the government was willing to use the military to keep the peace in Rio.

"We will not rule out considering any measure necessary to maintain peace and order in Rio de Janeiro, or anywhere else in Brazil," he said.

Rio has one of the highest murder rates in the world, with about 44 killings per 100,000 people a year.

Human-rights groups often criticize police tactics in the city. Police killed more than 1,000 civilians in Rio last year, routinely saying the dead were criminals trying to evade arrest.

Some 40 heavily armed gang members escaped a police dragnet Sunday by hiding in the forest that surrounds the Rocinha slum, police said.

That led some officials to resurrect the idea of a 10-foot wall around the slums.

"We need to build it immediately," said Luiz Paulo Conde, Rio de Janeiro state's deputy governor. "The wall isn't to stop the violence; it is to mark off territory."

Conde, who is also the Rio state environment secretary, said the wall was necessary to shield the environmentally protected forests from the expanding slums.

After his wall suggestion was met with harsh criticism, he backtracked and said he regretted proposing it, O Globo reported today.

Rio's mayor Maia called the wall proposal "unbelievable."

"They want to create some sort of theme park on drug and cocaine trafficking," he said.

Material from Reuters is included in this report.

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