

Brazilian police launch major operation in impoverished Rio favela



Brazilian officials said the operation was part of a 'pacification operation' to combat crime in Rio de Janeiro [Alexandre Loureiro/Reuters]

Rio de Janeiro, January 20 (RHC)-- More than 1,000 heavily-armed Brazilian police officers occupied an impoverished neighbourhood in Rio de Janeiro on Wednesday amid what officials said were renewed efforts to crack down on gangs and drug dealers.

Police drove armoured personnel cars into the Jacarezinho neighbourhood, patrolling streets and entering homes in a four-hour operation.

Jacarezinho is a sprawling favela on the north side of Rio, Brazil's second-largest city, where a police raid in May resulted in 29 deaths, including an officer's, and drew sharp criticism from human rights groups.

"The [Rio] state government began a territorial recovery in the Jacarezinho community. Surrounding communities will also be occupied," the military police said, alongside pictures of officers dressed in black patrolling the streets. The police said 1,200 officers were deployed in the favela, considered a bastion of the Comando Vermelho (Yellow Command) criminal group.

The operation came as Brazil is gearing up for general elections on October 2, which are expected to pit far-right President Jair Bolsonaro against his rival, former left-wing President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

Bolsonaro came into office in 2018 promising to tackle organised crime more aggressively. He has ushered in a tougher era of policing in Rio de Janeiro specifically, with Rio police killing a record 1,814 people in 2019.

But the former army captain faces a stiff challenge from Lula, who is leading in most recent opinion polls. Neither has formally announced their candidacy for the presidency.

Rio's military police said there were no violent encounters during Wednesday's operation, which had started in two favelas. A spokesperson said heavy police deployment deterred any armed response from the gangs. Police said they plan to occupy other nearby favelas, such as Manguinhos, Bandeira 2 and Conjunto Morar Carioca.

Rio Governor Claudio Castro said Wednesday's operation was the start of a new offensive to transform the favelas, echoing the rhetoric of the Police Pacifying Units (UPP) that displaced violent gangs in the city ahead of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games.

Police patrol Jacarezinho neighborhood in BrazilPolice said they plan to occupy other nearby favelas, such as Manguinhos, Bandeira 2 and Conjunto Morar Carioca [Alexandre Loureiro/Reuters]
Castro said on Twitter that he would give details on Saturday of further plans to restore security and "improve the lives of those who live in these areas".

Security and violence experts have questioned the efficacy of these operations, as well as the large number of deaths that often occur. May's raid in Jacarezinho had sparked protests after streets in the favela were left strewn with bodies and pools of blood.

Rights groups claimed it was the deadliest police operation in the history of a city that is all too used to violence and police killings – particularly in the poor, majority-Black favelas. The United Nations and leading human rights organisations called on prosecutors to investigate alleged summary executions during the operation, while two police officers have been prosecuted for murder.

The first UPP was set up in Rio's Santa Marta favela in 2008, and dozens more sites were rolled out across the state over the next 10 years. The so-called "pacification" project, which focused on community

policing to engage with residents and discourage gunfights, was an initial success and won early international praise.

But by 2018, the scheme was suffering from budget cuts and inconsistent support from corrupt state governments. That year, the federal government made a military intervention to take back control of Rio's streets, essentially killing off the UPP project.

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