

Brazil boosts security in capital as riot investigations continue

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Authorities are seeking to identify anyone who helped fund or organize the storming of government offices in Brasilia??

Brasilia, January 16 (RHC)-- Authorities in Brazil's capital have moved to increase security at government buildings that were ransacked by thousands of former President Jair Bolsonaro's supporters in what the government denounced as an "anti-democratic" attack.

Brasilia district authorities said on Monday that they would more than double the security deployment at the Esplanade of Ministries and Three Powers Square, areas where the government's presence is concentrated.

Acting district Governor Celina Leao also told reporters that a military police battalion in charge of security would be boosted from 248 to 500 members on a permanent basis for "maximum peace of mind."

The changes come just over a week after Bolsonaro supporters stormed Brazil's Congress, Supreme Court and presidential palace on January 8 in an effort to contest the new administration of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

Lula and other Brazilian government leaders have denounced the attack — which saw rioters destroy pieces of art and smash windows and furniture — as "terrorist acts and criminal, coup-mongering vandalism."

The left-wing president, who was formally sworn in on January 1, narrowly defeated Bolsonaro in an October presidential runoff that was widely viewed as the most divisive election in the South American nation's history. For months ahead of the vote, Bolsonaro had falsely claimed that Brazil's electronic voting system was vulnerable to widespread fraud, fuelling concerns that the former army captain would contest the results.

In the wake of his October defeat, Bolsonaro refused to concede, and his supporters took to the streets, erecting blockades and demanding that the election results be overturned. Many called on the Brazilian military to intervene to return the far-right leader to power.

Bolsonaro, who left Brazil for the United States just days before Lula's inauguration, has denied accusations that he helped fuel the riot in Brasilia. He tweeted after the riot that peaceful protest is part of democracy but vandalism and invasion of public buildings are "exceptions to the rule".

Still, the country's Supreme Court on Friday agreed to investigate Bolsonaro for possible "instigation and intellectual authorship of the anti-democratic acts that resulted in vandalism and violence in Brasilia."

"Public figures who continue to cowardly conspire against democracy trying to establish a state of exception will be held accountable," said Justice Alexandre de Moraes, who agreed to the request by federal prosecutors to launch the probe.

Moraes is leading the investigations into the riot, which the Brazilian authorities have said will focus not only on those who participated in ransacking the government buildings, but also anyone who funded or helped to carry out the events.

Brazil's former Minister of Justice and Public Security Anderson Torres, who was in charge of security in Brasilia during the invasion of government buildings last week, was arrested on Saturday in connection to the capital attack.

While the charges against Torres were not immediately available, Moraes accused the Bolsonaro ally of "connivance" and various "omissions" that contributed to the riot. Torres returned to Brazil over the weekend to face the accusations, after spending time in the U.S. state of Florida, where Bolsonaro remains. The Brazilian government had said it was prepared to seek Torres's extradition should he not turn himself in to face questioning.

According to Brazil's federal police, 1,159 people out of the more than 2,000 suspected rioters initially detained remain under arrest. The public prosecutor's office, for its part, said more than 800 have made initial custody hearing appearances.

The federal police said one person had been arrested on Monday as a result of a special operation dubbed “Ulysses,” which aims to track down “persons investigated for anti-democratic acts after the second round of presidential elections” in October, “as well as the acts that took place on January 8.” No details were provided about the person arrested, the department said. Two others facing arrest warrants remain at large.

Ulysses officers seized “mobile phones, computers and miscellaneous documents”, the police force said in a statement, as well as evidence “capable of linking the suspects to the organisation and leadership of events.”

Citing about a dozen police and anti-money laundering officials, the Reuters news agency also reported on Monday that a government-run payments system known as Pix is being used to try to track down the funders of the riot.

Launched in November 2020 and run by Brazil’s central bank, Pix is free of charge for individuals, allowing them to instantly transfer money to others via online banking apps. It has become a key financial pillar underpinning Bolsonaro’s election-denial movement, allowing his most ardent supporters to crowdfund alternative media outlets and far-right demonstrations.

“We have a secure and consistent line of investigation focused on tracking financial movements undertaken via Pix,” a senior federal police officer involved in the riot probe told Reuters. “The financiers’ time is up,” said the officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the ongoing investigation.

Pix transfers are covered by bank secrecy laws, and police can only access a suspect’s transaction history with judicial authorisation, Reuters said.

Brazil’s central bank said in a statement that “all Pix operations are traceable”, adding that it “always works closely with the competent authorities in the investigation of any crimes involving the financial system”.

Meanwhile, Brazil’s Deputy Justice Minister Ricardo Cappelli told reporters on Monday that investigators also were seeking to determine whether there were any “professionals” among the rioters, who clamoured for a military coup.

Delegated by the executive to take charge of security in Brasilia after the violence, Cappelli cited witness testimony of “men ... with knowledge of the terrain, combat tactics” among the demonstrators. Lula and his justice minister have both said the riot was unlikely to have happened without inside help, including from the security forces.

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