

Analysis

Brazil's Red Command and the Police Who Fight Them

Details

Written by Ioan Grillo*

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Brazil (/brazil-organized-crime-news) **Red Command** (/brazil-organized-crime-news/red-command)



A police operation in Antares favela, Rio de Janeiro

In the Antares favela, a flat dusty slum in the far west of Rio de Janeiro, the control of the Red Command remains intact and blatant.

Guarding all the entrances to the favela are criminal lookouts carrying radios and pistols. On the favela streets, the Red Command operatives sell drugs openly at several known points, called "bocas," where bags of cocaine, marijuana and crack are displayed on tables with labels marking their prices. Red Command operatives drive between the bocas on

motorcycles, bearing arms such as Kalashnikovs with grenade launchers. At a recent Antares music event known as a Baile Funk party hosted by the Red Command on a Friday night, the gangsters even danced holding their rifles in the air.

These remarkable scenes of gangsters operating so brazenly reflect the history of Rio's favelas and their relationship to organized crime. Favelas, or communities founded on squatted land, date back to the late 19th century founded chiefly by former slaves. Brazil only abolished slavery in 1888, two decades after the United States. Throughout the 20th century, favelas swelled with migrants from the countryside while remaining largely outside the law and often lacking in basic services such as running water. Today, the favelas are home to more than 11 million of Brazil's 200 million people.

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With high unemployment, criminals such as street assailants and bank robbers long operated out of favelas. Under Brazil's military dictatorship in the 1970s, the most violent of these delinquents were incarcerated on the Ilha Grande prison island alongside leftist guerrillas and political prisoners, who they might have beaten and intimidated. The favela gangsters, however, united with the educated leftists and founded the Red Command in 1980. The command took on the guerrillas' rhetoric of fighting the government and cell-like organization -- a structure that has made it so difficult to dismantle. While the military dictatorship ended in 1985 and most of the political prisoners were pardoned and freed, the Red Command spread through the prison system and into the favelas.

SEE ALSO: Uruguay: Marijuana, Organized Crime, and the Politics of Drugs
(<http://www.insightcrime.org/special-series/uruguay-marijuana-legalization>)

With its base in the Rio slums, the Red Command built an extensive international drug trafficking network, providing it with hundreds of millions of dollars to buy weapons and pay thousands of gunmen, whom it calls "soldiers." It forged strong links with the Colombian traffickers and guerrillas (<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/23/world/colombian-army-says-rebels-helped-captured-drug-lord.html>) from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), helping them move cocaine toward the United States and Europe. Brazilian Red Command leader Luiz Fernando da Costa was indicted by a US federal grand jury and sanctioned under the Kingpin Act (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=79599>) for trafficking to the United States and was arrested in Colombia in 2001. The Command also nurtured an exceptionally profitable domestic market; Brazil is now the second biggest consumer of cocaine in the world after the United States, with about 4 million Brazilians estimated to have taken the drug at least once (<http://www.obid.senad.gov.br/portais/OBID/biblioteca/documentos/Relatorios/329529.pdf>).

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The vast profits from this trade caused Red Command bosses to fight among themselves and the organization splintered, with rivals Amigos dos Amigos emerging in 1998 and the Pure Third Command in 2002. This caused a series of bloody territorial battles between gunmen from the various commands, increasing the homicide rate. The Red Command also carries out executions inside its territory against alleged thieves or rapists, with gangsters holding "trials" before discharging their sentences. This alternative "justice system" poses a serious challenge to the power of the government in areas where many distrust the police.

"The Command is an absolute power in these communities," said Andre Fernandes, a Brazilian journalist who heads a favela news network. "They are arbitrators of life and death. They decide everything."

An Antares drug seller called Lucas, 28 years old, described how he first joined the Red Command when he was 12 years old, which is typical of many recruits.

"I wanted fame at that time," Lucas said. "I was never scared. I am not frightened of gunfights. I love the adrenaline."

Lucas now runs a drug selling point, working 24-hour shifts and making a commission based on sales. Long lines at the drug points on two visits suggested that business was doing well. Lucas described how the Red Command will ambush police if they enter the favela, with spies calling on the radio to signal the police positions. Red Command gunmen then use higher ground such as hills or rooftops to fire on the officers.

SEE ALSO: Brazil News and Profiles (</brazil-organized-crime-news>)

To win over residents, the Red Command will pay for some services, such as water and sewage systems, buy medicine for the sick and finance free dance parties, Lucas said.

"The city doesn't do anything for us," he complained. "So we have to do it ourselves."

Police informants also risk a death sentence, Lucas said.

Urban War

Fighting the Red Command are police units including the Coordenadoria de Recursos Especiais (CORE), an elite group similar to a SWAT team, with a logo of a skull with a knife through it. CORE commander Rodrigo Oliveira is a former soldier who has been in the unit for 20 years and served in hundreds of firefights. In one, he was shot, and part of the bullet remains embedded in the back of his head. Following that shooting, he was in the hospital for two days but back at work within a week.

"There is a reason for that," Oliveira said. "If you stop, you are going to be afraid the next time. You can't stop. Every day we go to the favelas we are under fire. Nowadays the guys from the [Brazilian] army come here to train with us. Instead of police learning from the military, it is the military learning from the police."

The narrow streets of favelas often force CORE officers to abandon their armored vehicles. They move in pairs, covering each other and the following pair in a form of a chain, a tactic that is heavily drilled, Oliveira said. A constant challenge is to be on higher ground than the Command gunmen. To try to avoid being outflanked, officers work out routes through many of the maze-like slums and rely on helicopters flying overhead.

The CORE officers face high caliber firearms that are often stolen from the armies of Bolivia and Paraguay -- where poorly paid soldiers take part in thefts -- and arrive in Brazil over porous borders, according to Oliveira. Traffickers also use homemade explosives that are dangerously unpredictable and sometimes blow fingers or limbs off the CORE bomb unit. Oliveira explained that the CORE strategy is to use intelligence to launch raids on the safe houses stashing the guns and bombs, and to go after the most violent criminals.

Oliveira said that work by the CORE and other police units helped reduce violence in Rio state even before the pacification program began, from a peak of 8,321 homicides in 2002 to 6,313 in 2007. It remains dangerous work, however. From January to mid-August 2014, 179 officers in Rio were shot, 49 of whom died (http://robertatrindade.com.br/?page_id=16244).

Nevertheless, human rights defenders argue that the officers use their guns too freely. Brazil's police kill about 2,000 people across the country every year for allegedly resisting arrest, according to Amnesty International (<http://www.amnestyusa.org/news/news-item/brazil-police-still-have-blood-on-their-hands-20-years-after-candelaria-massacre>). Oliveira said they try hard to avoid civilian deaths, but the criminals choose to attack in heavily populated areas.

"We are in a war," he said. "The drug gangs compete in an arms race and bring weapons of war into the city. The population is in the middle of this combat."

Pacified Favelas?

The pacification program aims to break out of this deadlock by establishing a permanent police presence in the form of Police Pacification Units (UPPs). To establish UPPs, police announce they will make an incursion on the radio and television (<http://g1.globo.com/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2014/03/conjunto-de-favelas-da-mare-e-ocupado-para-instalacao-de-upp.html>), then enter the favela backed by soldiers, armored vehicles and helicopters. With officers having a constant presence inside these pacified favelas, gangsters can no longer brazenly display guns, reducing the turf wars and killings. Residents are also shown that the government, not the commandos, controls their area.

By August 2014, police had established 39 UPPs serving hundreds of thousands of residents in more than 100 of about 600 favelas in the metropolitan area. Pacified areas include the largest favelas and almost all the slums near the city center where tourists might venture. The Rio state government claims that homicides inside the pacified favelas have dropped 65 percent (<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/16/opinion/fear-and-backsliding-in-rio.html>) and investments in businesses such as restaurants have been encouraging.

The program, however, faces two major obstacles. First, with the pre-deployment public warning, gangsters can simply move to other areas such as Antares on the outskirts. The majority of the 1.7 million favela dwellers in Rio (<http://censo2010.ibge.gov.br/en/noticias-censo?busca=1&id=3&idnoticia=2057&view=noticia>) still live in unpacified areas.

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"You just transfer the problem from one area to another area," Commander Oliveira acknowledged. "If I tell a criminal that I am going to his house tomorrow, is he going to stay in his house? Of course not. And that is what has happened. Now the problem has gone from the middle of the city to the periphery."

Second, police have struggled to win the support of residents, especially when they have been drawn into firefights. In April 2014, the well-known dancer Douglas Rafael da Silva was shot dead (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/23/rio-deadly-clashes-death-of-dancer>) in the Pavao Pavaozinho favela, close to the famous Copacabana beach. Da Silva was a success story who had danced on a popular television show and his death provoked protests that turned into riots.

Police claim they returned fire with drug traffickers and were not sure whose bullet hit da Silva. Yet witnesses say that police fired at unarmed youths because they were smoking marijuana, and one of the bullets hit the dancer.

"Police are totally unprepared for working in this community," said Paulo dos Santos, a neighbor and actor, who had worked with da Silva. "They are the law, but they don't respect it. We don't want these type of cops."

Other residents still support the police incursion despite the deaths.

"At least there are less gangsters with guns now," said Leandro Matus, who owns a bicycle shop next to where da Silva was shot. "I don't trust the police but they are the lesser of the two evils."

Commander Oliveira admits that to win over residents, the Rio government needs to invest more in social programs. While Brazil has expanded the middle class in recent years, about 16 million people still live in extreme poverty (<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90777/90852/7369481.html>), including many of those in the favelas. Illiteracy among black Brazilians, who are the majority in the favelas, is also almost three times that of white Brazilians (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/71352352-112c-11e1-ad22-00144feabdc0.html>).

"The only part of the state that goes inside these areas is the police," said Oliveira. "Other parts of the state have to go inside the favelas as well. We need investment in education and in health. But it's not happening. It is just police officers. This way, we are not going to win this war."

**Ioan Grillo is a journalist based in Mexico City. He has covered Latin America and the Caribbean since 2001 for media including Time Magazine, Reuters and the Sunday Telegraph. He is author of the book El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency, which was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times' Festival of Books and The Orwell Prize.*

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