

Out of control

Criminal gangs fight back in Rio's favelas

As Brazil increases its pacification programmes in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, the ousted criminal gangs are fighting back. **Antônio Sampaio** examines how police are countering the threat as they try to secure the city ahead of the 2016 Olympic Games.

► KEY POINTS

- Organised criminal groups have launched a series of counter-attacks against 'pacification' police forces deployed to favelas in Rio de Janeiro.
- With the pacification programme continuing to expand in scope, police units will be spread increasingly thinly, reducing their ability to effectively deter criminal groups.
- Moves to train more police units with elite paramilitary units have the potential to further damage the reputation of the occupying police forces, increasing the risk of the local population switching its support to organised criminal groups.

Rio de Janeiro is at the centre of a series of large-scale sporting events intended to show off Brazil's capabilities and economic power. The city hosted matches for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and will be the first South American host of the Olympic Games in 2016. However, since March 2014, the city's inhabitants have also witnessed a return of urban warfare.

After six years of a pacification programme that includes the permanent presence of security forces, state institutions, and services in previously violent favelas (slums), organised criminal groups have staged a counter-attack. Whereas between 2008 and 2013, criminal groups that had controlled the favelas for decades preferred to withdraw and avoid confrontation with the pacification forces,

in 2014 they have staged bold attacks and adopted new tactics. These attacks caused eight deaths within the police force in the year to November, the highest number of casualties in 'pacified' favelas since the programme was first implemented in 2008, and more than double the three deaths recorded in 2013.

The wave of violence registered in some of the city's largest favelas represents the first co-ordinated effort by criminal groups to undertake a sustained campaign against the Police Pacification Units (Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora: UPPs). The units were set up as a way to control strategic points in the city where criminal groups posed a threat to major highways and transit areas between hotels and sporting sites. Attacks in October added a symbolic challenge to state power, with criminal actions increasing days before the first round of presidential and local elections on 5 October. One criminal group, the Friends of Friends (Amigos dos Amigos: ADA), launched direct attacks on police and military units.

Take and hold

First implemented in 2008 in Rio's small favelas, the pacification programme was conceived by State Security Secretary José Mariano Beltrame, and described in his autobiography, as "a logic to implode the power of drug trafficking by shaking its territorial structure".

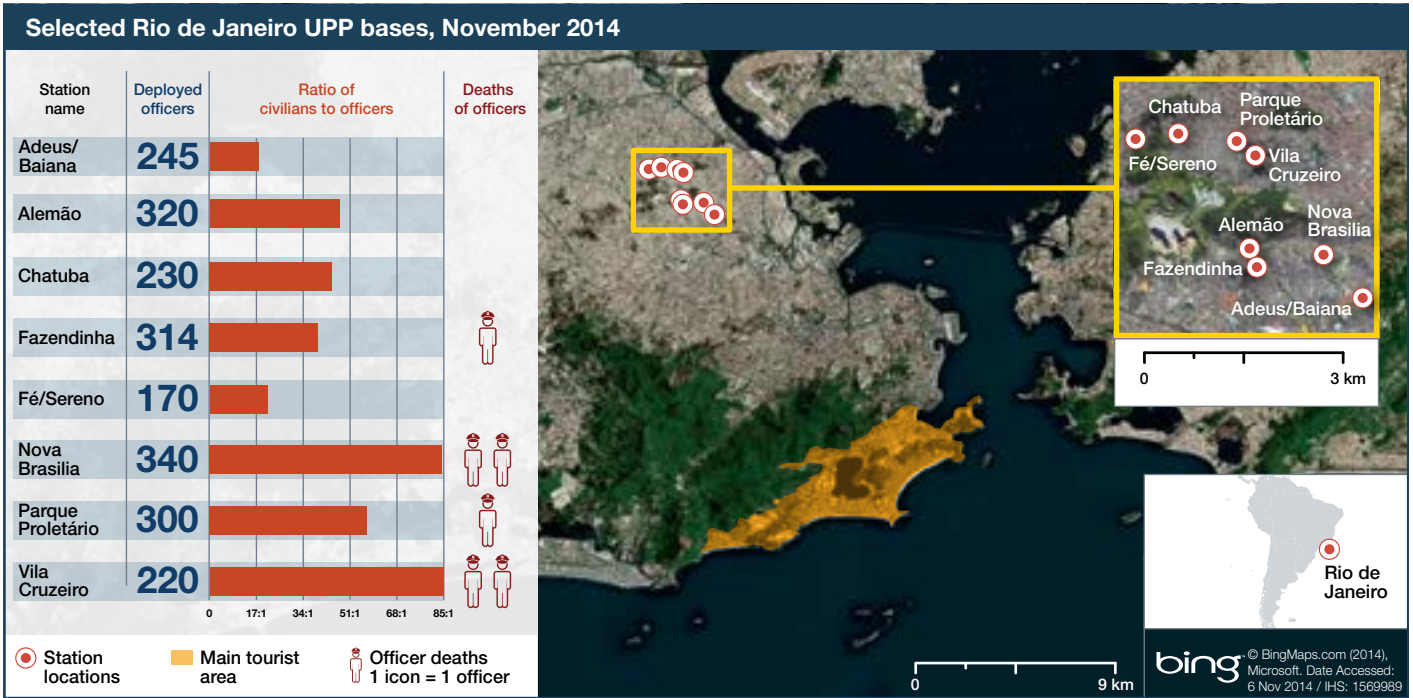
Despite previous attempts at community policing inside favelas, the UPPs gathered a significant level of popular support from 2010, when Brazilian Armed Forces M113 armoured personnel carriers were successfully used against barricades set up

in Vila Cruzeiro, in the north of the city.

By then, groups such as the Red Command (Comando Vermelho: CV) and ADA were accustomed to rapid incursions by Military Police (Polícia Militar: PM) personnel using lightly armoured cars. Faced with a heightened level of military power, the criminals broke and ran, with their escape in November 2010 being filmed from helicopters and broadcast live on television.

That escape, alongside the ceremonies marking the planting of the Brazilian flag in occupied slums, became symbolic images of a new and more aggressive state approach to decades-old criminal groups there. However, the success was not only a result of such images, but also numbers. The average number of violent deaths in the occupied favelas fell by 75% in comparison to the months before the arrival of UPPs, according to a study co-ordinated by Brazilian analyst Ignacio Cano, a sociologist specialising in criminal violence, which analysed crime reports in 13 communities since 2006. However, this relative success story began to change in March 2014, not only because of the frequency of attacks by criminal gangs aiming to regain territory, but also because of the degree of co-ordination involved. By mid-March, four PM officers had been killed in pacified favelas in 2014.

The bulk of the violence occurred in the Alemão and Penha slum complexes, an agglomeration of narrow streets home to 140,000 people that had been under the longstanding rule of the CV until 2010. Criminals adopted a strategy of targeted killings of officers, using the confusing array of alleys to



quickly disappear. They also directly engaged the PM in a display of audacity never seen in the history of the UPP programme.

In response, Beltrame reinforced the police presence in Alemão with 100 members of the Special Police Operations Battalion (Batalhão de Operações Policiais Especiais: BOPE), a force linked to the PM and specialised in urban intervention in highly violent areas. The decision was taken after armed fighters conducted

simultaneous attacks in four different locations of Alemão, one of which was against a heavily armed PM detachment, resulting in the death of the sub-commander of one of the UPP bases there.

The arrival of BOPE on 15 March was portrayed negatively in the Brazilian media, which termed it a 'reoccupation', suggesting that the previous pacification operation was seen as unsuccessful and signalling the

diminished deterrent capacity of the existing UPP force. Before the month was over, the police casualty count for slums under the UPP programme had reached six.

However, the pacification programme did fulfil its original aim of deterring bold attacks during the FIFA World Cup (12 June–13 July), especially the previously common practices of criminal groups attacking civilians and blocking tunnels and highways close to

UPP officers search for drugs in Rio de Janeiro's Vidigal favela during the FIFA World Cup, on 11 July 2014. Although the UPPs received a significant level of popular backing when they were initially deployed, support inside the favelas is waning. PA: 1572414



favelas. The BOPE reinforcements and the implementation in June of security measures for the World Cup, with the deployment of 57,000 armed forces personnel to host cities, helped reduce violence.

This was an important success for the pacification programme, because it was originally planned primarily as a way to guarantee the free movement of delegations, visitors, and the general population in Rio for the duration of the World Cup. The challenge of achieving that was one of the main drivers for the commitment in human and financial resources to the Alemão complex and for the early April occupation of the nearby Maré complex. Both are large agglomerations of different favelas located close to the international airport and next to the three main highways leading to the city (including the Red Line, which connects the airport to the hotels and main tourist destinations in the city's south zone).

The operational environment in both areas is extremely complex, because they were the headquarters for the CV and its different

the CV led to the closing of the Avenida Brasil, a crucial road for Rio's connections with the overall national highway networks. The exchange of small-arms fire amid the civilian population and the positioning of military armoured vehicles along the highway was reminiscent of the pre-UPP era.

The actions by ADA were primarily motivated by the arrest of key leaders of the rival TCP some weeks before the invasion, which created a vacuum that could be exploited. Nevertheless, the fighting showed the decreased deterrent effect of the heavily armed security force presence in Maré. The territory came to represent the impasse facing security authorities in Rio: the more they expanded the pacification programme to larger and more strategic points for the organised criminal groups, the more they risked stretching their forces too thinly and becoming vulnerable to counter-attacks.

Robson Rodrigues, a former co-ordinator of Rio's UPP who took part in the implementation of the first units, told *IHS Jane's* that the

he concluded that the UPPs' "intensive investment in human capital confirms that it is not possible to expand the project to the broader territory, given its cost". At that time, the city had 22 UPP units. The programme has since expanded to 39 UPP bases patrolling 264 favelas with a combined population of 608,000 people. This caused a reduction in the presence of police officers in each favela from an average of 18 per 1,000 inhabitants in 2012 to 15 in 2014. The occupation of Maré in April 2014 required the support of 2,050 army troops, which were later required to extend their deployment, when it was decided that the initial army presence used during the aftermath of the occupation should stay due to the complexity of Maré.

Adding to the pressure on security authorities to maintain order in an increasingly over-stretched programme is a public relations nightmare due to the behaviour of existing officers and the poor training of new ones. Two high-profile cases of human rights abuse helped turn public opinion significantly against the UPP programme and even increased support for criminal groups among favela dwellers.

In the second half of 2013, 29 PM officers were accused of participating in the abduction and torture of stonemason Amarildo de Souza in Rocinha, sparking a nationwide social media campaign asking 'where is Amarildo?'. Searches are still under way for his body and 10 officers have been charged in connection with his death. In April 2014, Douglas Rafael da Silva Pereira, a well-known dancer, was shot dead in Pavão Pavãozinho favela in the south zone of Rio, next to the affluent neighbourhoods of Copacabana and Ipanema. The two episodes sparked protests in several communities in areas with UPPs.

The downward trend in the popular opinion of government forces provided an opening for criminal groups – especially CV – to exploit. In March, during the height of the attacks against the UPP in Alemão, authorities announced they had uncovered community leaders there co-ordinating their actions with the criminal group. In Pavão Pavãozinho, the UPP base was attacked by suspected CV members at the same time that a protest was under way related to Douglas Pereira's death.

One man, Edilson Silva dos Santos, was killed during the ensuing fighting between protesters and the police that day. In September, a telephone conversation between two alleged CV members was recorded by Federal Police investigators and later aired by Globo

'The downward trend in the popular opinion of government forces provided an opening for criminal groups to exploit'

breakaway factions, and because of their sheer size, with a combined population of 200,000 inhabitants. Despite the reinforcements and the highly visible presence of the armed forces, one other PM casualty was registered on 23 June, during the World Cup, when a PM detachment was ambushed in Alemão.

Counter-attack

After the end of the World Cup, the challenges to the pacification programme gradually increased and reached a critical point in September and early October – days before the first round of the local and presidential elections on 5 October. With the security forces proving unable to fully restore control over large slums, ADA felt confident enough to stage a full-scale invasion of Maré to retake its former headquarters, mainly from rival group Pure Third Command (Terceiro Comando Puro: TCP). It also staged direct attacks against UPP bases and even directly engaged the army and BOPE.

The resulting fighting between security forces and these two breakaway factions of

arrival of the programme set Maré's criminal underworld in disarray. He said, "There was an informal settlement between criminal forces, but very fragile."

This informal truce ended in October, leading to the return of what Rodrigues calls "criminal geopolitics". He added, "Other sporadic disputes are erupting in Alemão and Rocinha [the second most densely inhabited slum in Rio, with 69,000 people] to boost the illicit drugs and weapons trade." The more frequent targeting of UPP forces in these larger slums ties up the UPP forces in a confusing crossfire of rival gangs and opens up paths for the return of criminal groups.

The core concept of the pacification programme is the permanent presence of security forces, in order to bring state presence, institutions, and better public services to the favelas. It is labour-intensive, and for that reason Cano warned in his 2012 study of the security impact of the pacification programme, *The Owners of the Hill*, that the existing forces had expanded too far already.

Cano conducted a study in 2012 in which

TV. In the recording, the two individuals reported orders from CV leaders for the local population to stage protests in order to create chaos and facilitate criminal attacks.

With the increase in alleged human rights abuses throughout 2014, the frequent protests have added to the tense atmosphere among army and police officers. Diógenes Lucca, one of the founders of the Special Tactical Actions Group (Grupos de Ações Táticas Especiais: GATE) of the PM in São Paulo, told *IHS Jane's*, “Many people did not believe that a large favela like Rocinha could be pacified. The population was happy, the authorities became very popular, but the programme started losing strength along the way. There is now a lack of trust in the deterrent credentials of the state, which no longer has the capacity to make the triumphal entrances in slums that used to be the norm.” As a result, he added, “Police officers in the UPP areas are feeling like Don Quixote, fighting an impossible battle.”

This has been recognised by the security authorities, which envisaged the BOPE reinforcement sent in March as a way of injecting energy into UPP forces. According to comments made at the time by the programme’s coordinator, Colonel Frederico Caldas, “The presence of BOPE will provide operational and psychological support [to the PM].” Caldas, who was injured by a bullet in Rocinha in February, added that BOPE’s presence would be permanent.

Elite force

The fight for the popular support of favela dwellers has also been adopted by the top authorities in the state. With support for the pacification programme further undermined by the perceived lack of a developmental approach to security, Rio de Janeiro mayor Eduardo Paes announced in August that there would be a major revamp of the pacification programme’s social arm.

The UPP Social had been originally advertised as the second leg of the programme, with the same importance as that of security. But favela dwellers still face longstanding sanitation and infrastructure gaps, such as open-air human waste and precarious electricity and water distribution networks. Paes promised a BRL888 million (USD360 million) investment in the social programme, which was now being rebranded as ‘Rio Mais Social’ (‘More Social Rio’). In an official statement released on 8 August, Paes said that he recognised the need for better communication with favela residents.

A UPP officer patrols Rio's Vidigal favela on 11 July 2014. The average number of violent deaths in the occupied favelas fell by 75% in comparison to the months before the arrival of UPPs.

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Beltrame also addressed the swelling ranks of critics by saying that UPP officers were fighting “to liberate people under a tyranny” imposed by criminal groups. He added in March that the attacks represented a form of “terrorism against the state”. He warned in October that organised criminal groups were attempting to inflict political damage on the security authorities by staging attacks during the lead-up to the first round of elections.

In 2010, he said, a similar wave of attacks had the aim of hurting the re-election chances of governor Sérgio Cabral, during whose mandate the pacification programme was first implemented. He concluded, “This is an articulated movement by drug traffickers to demoralise the pacification programme due to the losses suffered.”

Some of the attacks in September and October resembled past offensives by CV that were intended to intimidate the authorities and the general population. Signature CV tactics were seen on 1 October when buses were burned and businesses were ordered to close in Penha, next to Alemão, where the group has traditionally been stronger.

Symbolic violence and co-ordination are standard operating procedures for the CV. The group was founded in the 1970s in a prison in Ilha Grande, in the state of Rio, by criminals who learned guerrilla tactics from left-wing insurgents imprisoned there by the military junta that ruled Brazil at the time.

It has remained the boldest of the criminal gangs operating in Rio, staging several co-ordinated waves of attacks in the past decade. In 2010, 35 people were killed in six days

of attacks that combined ambushes against police and military forces and the burning of coaches. Those attacks took place shortly before the invasion of Alemão, then the CV’s headquarters.

Given the fragmented nature of the criminal scene in Rio, with several CV breakaway groups and militias (formed by current and former police officers), it is difficult to pinpoint the exact drivers for the latest wave of attacks. Despite that, the Security Secretariat for Rio de Janeiro State reported to electoral authorities in 2014 that 41 areas within the city were under the control of either criminal groups or militias. In those areas, campaigning was either blocked or regulated by the armed groups themselves. A stronger sign of a political orientation was the ban imposed in crime-controlled favelas on any placards or campaign personnel linked to governing candidate Luiz Fernando Pezão (who took over from Sérgio Cabral, who resigned to run for a Senate seat).

Other candidates had to pay a fee to criminal groups, including in some areas of Alemão up to BRL100,000 (USD40,544), according to a report by *O Globo* newspaper. The fact that Pezão was blocked out in traditional CV territories points to the overall aversion of the CV and other groups to the authorities responsible for the pacification concept.

Outlook

Authorities are reporting tactical innovations by organised criminal groups in 2014, in an apparent attempt to adapt to an operational environment characterised by the presence of government forces that are heavily armed



Police prepare to patrol different favelas in Rio on 24 October ahead of the presidential run-off election. Violence had increased in the run-up to the first round earlier in the month. PA: 1572411

but lack the sheer numbers and impressive displays of hardware that usually take place during the initial occupations.

Investigations leading to the arrest of a suspected CV boss in Alemão in September surprised authorities because he had no previous criminal record. The use of 'clean record' members by groups has become increasingly common, according to local UPP officers. Minors under 18 have also been frequently involved in exchanges of fire with the security forces in 2014. Armed groups have also adopted co-ordinated ambushes against patrols in different points of the same favela, and according to the UPP have forced inhabitants of narrow favela alleys to leave their doors open so they can escape more easily.

CV in particular is likely to continue its attempts to undermine the pacification programme. The group's traditional inclination is to openly defy the authorities (much more so than ADA and TCP), in a similar fashion to First Capital Command (Primeiro Comando da Capital: PCC) in São Paulo. CV also still has a strong grip on the communities in which it operates. Some of these areas are located inside large favela complexes such as Alemão, but CV still operates freely in some smaller slums in the peripheries without UPP bases. The tactical innovations identified since October show a disposition to, and some level of success in, adapting to a more hostile environment.

The effective co-ordination between authorities at the municipal, state, and federal levels guarantees strong political support for the programme and therefore the ability to retain the armed forces' support in Maré, for

instance, for as long as needed. Whereas BOPE reinforcements have not been able to substantially reduce violence, the quick relocation of army and PM forces and the reinforcements sent from other, more tranquil, UPP bases have successfully halted waves of attacks such as those that occurred in election week in early October.

One of the weak spots identified and targeted by organised criminal groups has been the permanent forces stationed in sprawling favelas with 60,000 inhabitants or more (for example, Alemão, Maré, and Rocinha). In combination with the reduction in the morale of the PM personnel, a picture emerges of a weakened but far from defeated pacification force. A more serious threat is posed by continued criticism and negative perceptions of the UPPs among favela communities. This has been linked to human rights abuses and the use of younger, less experienced, PM officers to fill posts in pacified areas. Marcelo Freixo, a state legislator who conducted an investigation in 2008 leading to the arrest of more than 200 people involved with paramilitary militias in Rio, said he had received complaints from students of the police training academy, saying preparation for law enforcement work in UPP areas is poor. One recruit said he was never shown how to use a baton.

The announcement in March that some UPP officers would be trained by members of BOPE is likely to prove a mixed blessing, given the elite force's tactical orientation towards urban intervention and its anti-social reputation. The greatest flaw of the UPPs in the eyes of favela dwellers has been the unfriendly and

in some cases brutal approach by the police.

Plans remain for the expansion of the programme, with the opening of the first UPP bases in the northern suburbs of Rio taking place in 2014 (the first opened in May in Duque de Caxias). This is both a recognition of the overall potential of the programme and a challenge for the existing forces, which are stretched thinly in an urban conflict that has just reached a higher level of intensity.

Despite the increasing pressure by criminal groups aggressively pushing to re-establish their criminal interests, there remains significant political support for the UPP programme. The federal government's willingness to allow for military aid to be extended in Maré is an example of that. The political importance of the UPPs has also meant a constant pressure for expansion of the programme as a way of showing results and tackling complaints of criminal migration, which puts pressure on the police's human resources. This weak point has been – and is likely to continue to be – exploited by criminal gangs. As the city moves closer to the 2016 Olympic Games, sporadic waves of attacks are likely to take place, which can harm tourism. During the World Cup, criminal groups reduced frontal assaults against UPP forces, but did not entirely halt them. This means that, despite a likely increase in the military presence on the streets for the games, there remains a low risk of criminal violence affecting the event. Longer-term challenges in police training and intelligence remain in order to bring about a balance between the fight against criminal groups and the need to bring social stability in Rio's complex slums. ■

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▶ ON THE WEB

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- Event horizon – Brazil's security forces gear up for global events
- José Mariano Beltrame, Rio State Security Secretary

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