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Body count rises in Brazil's drug war

Cartels, police fight in streets for control of Rio de Janeiro

By Luis Vieira THE WASHINGTON TIMES

While U.S. attention has focused on the raging drug war just south of the border in Mexico, the battle to control drugs in Brazil is taking more lives.

Since Mexican President Felipe Calderon declared war on the drug cartels three years ago, 9,500 people have died in drug-related violence, including 5,300 killed last year, according to the Mexican government.

In Brazil, 35,000 people were fatally shot in 2007, and most of the deaths were drug-related. According to the government's public safety secretariat, there are nearly 23,000 drug-related homicides a year.

The drug war in Brazil is centered in its best-known city, Rio de Janeiro, and its slums, known as favelas, where police sometimes fear to tread, as well as in poor neighborhoods of Sao Paulo, Porto Alegre, Recife, Salvador, Curitiba and Belo Horizonte. Gun battles rage between rival gangs that seek to control the lucrative trade, particularly in cocaine, whose use has doubled in recent years in Brazil, according to the United Nations.

The drug war burst into international headlines earlier this month when traffickers in Rio shot down a police helicopter. The crash and an ensuing battle between the traffickers and police and between rival drug gangs killed 39 persons.

Other such crimes have terrified the country in recent years. Drug traffickers kidnapped and murdered a local television reporter, Tim Lopes, in 2002, and a 6-year-old boy died in a car robbery after being dragged outside the car for several miles in another drug-related crime in 2007.

The crime wave is particularly unsettling as Rio prepares to host the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics two years later.

Police have tremendous difficulty apprehending the criminals in the favelas, where residents, fearing for their lives, will not divulge information. The cartels in those areas also bolster popular collaboration by providing food, medicine and other necessities to the desperately poor.

The weapons used by the traffickers are often unregistered; some are stolen from the police and the Brazilian army, according to the British magazine the Economist.

Luis Villamarin, a retired colonel in the Colombian army and author of many books about drug trafficking and counterterrorism, said the cocaine sold in Brazil comes largely from the Colombian Marxist guerrilla group FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

"The capture of Fernando Beira-Mar in 2002 was the first proof," he said, referring to the then-drug-kingpin in Brazil whose dealings with FARC were confirmed by Brazilian and Colombian authorities.

Mr. Villamarin also accused some Brazilian government employees of complicity with the Colombian guerrillas. In July 2008, the magazine Cambio asserted that the laptop of the former FARC leader Raul Reyes included messages from top advisers to Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. The press office of Brazil's presidency as well as the Justice Ministry have refused to comment on the allegations.

Brazilians turn to drugs for the same reasons that people do elsewhere. A recent survey by the Brazilian Institute for Statistics and Opinion found that 35 percent use drugs to escape from family problems, 15 percent to win acceptance from friends and 9 percent to experience something new.

Another study, by UNICEF, suggested that wealthier Brazilians, not the poor, were the main drug users and noted that 27.8 percent of Brazilian students have reported using drugs.

"A crisis in values is leading people to drugs," said Gilberto Velho, an anthropologist and professor at the federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

Human rights activists say that the use of force against the traffickers treats the symptoms, not the underlying disease. Marcos Rolim, a consultant to UNICEF, says it is better to legalize drugs than fight against them. "Policies of the type 'war on drugs' [have] just produced human deaths," he said. "The legalization of drugs should be considered and tested in Brazil."

Former Rio police chief Rui Machado disagreed.

"What makes Brazil so violent is the destruction of institutions such as family and authorities like police in our society, creating a lack of punishment," he said.

He attributed the inefficiency of the police to the failure of the government in the broader sense.

In the U.S. and Britain, "citizens have a lot of responsibilities; in Brazil, the citizens have just rights," he said.

Mr. Machado, a retired colonel, added that "while the drug traffickers have 21st-century technology to get information, safety authorities have none. It is impossible to make good decisions without information."

Officials are also asking for more help from the federal government.

"There is a national responsibility; it is not just local authorities," said Gilmar Mendes, the minister in charge of the Brazilian Supreme Court, to TV Globo last week. The secretary for public safety in Rio, Jose Beltrame, also asked for more assistance. "The state police are doing the job of federal police," he said. He called the shooting down of the police helicopter Brazil's "9/11."

Brazilian Minister of Justice Tarso Genro denied the criticisms and said the federal government is providing intelligence to local authorities to improve public safety. "There is not a lack of action," he said. "We have a partnership between Ministry of Justice and government of the state of Rio de Janeiro."