

The Occupation of Rocinha and Vidigal

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By Sarah de Sainte Croix, Senior Contributing Reporter

RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL – In what is being painted as a historic victory for peace in Rio de Janeiro, in the early hours of Sunday morning, police and military security forces moved into some of the last remaining gang-controlled favelas in the city's Zona Sul (South Zone). Rocinha, Brazil's largest favela famous for its awe-inspiring scale and geography as well as the heavily-armed *traficantes*, is now occupied.



The occupation of Rocinha, photo by Marino Azevedo/Imprensa RJ.

In an [operation](#) that lasted just two hours and passed without a single gunshot being fired, the neighboring favelas of Rocinha, Vidigal and Chácara do Céu were invaded by around 3,000 security personnel including military and civil police officers, federal traffic officers and naval soldiers.

Supported by approximately nineteen tanks and armored vehicles, nine helicopters and an assortment of other police vehicles, the occupation began in earnest at around 2:30AM on Sunday when police blocked off all the access routes into the communities. Just after 4AM the first tanks rolled into Rocinha and Vidigal and helicopters began to circulate overhead.

Eyewitness reports say that the favelas were eerily quiet on Saturday night. "Everybody stayed inside. The usual weekend parties didn't happen. Everybody was waiting to see what would happen next," one Rocinha resident said.

According to [Stewart Alsop](#), a Californian living in Vidigal, "At around 2:30AM the traffickers started putting up road blocks. There was one road block that consisted of a line of trash about one meter high. Another one that consisted of old mattresses and motorcycles...it seemed extremely likely that the traffickers would put up some sort of fight."

But the anticipated firefight never happened, and by around 6AM the communities were declared occupied. At 12:45 in the afternoon the next day, Brazilian and Rio State flags were being symbolically hoisted in the center of Rocinha.

Alsop speculates, "After the leadership of the gangs were [arrested or escaped](#) [earlier in the week]...the only traffickers left were small time managers and street soldiers...these young men had only three options on Sunday: hide, go to prison, or die."



A helicopter circles the steep banks of Rocinha during the Sunday occupation operation, photo by Marino Azevedo/Imprensa RJ.

According to the most recent reports, just six men were arrested (in addition to [those arrested earlier in the week](#)), and more than 100 types of weapons; 43 rifles, two rocket launchers, a submachine gun, as well as almost half a ton of drugs and 75 motorcycles have been seized.

They also discovered human remains at a location at the top of Vidigal which, according to residents, was being used by traffickers as a clandestine cemetery.

Reports vary as to the feeling in the communities following Sunday's operation. Some reported feelings of euphoria and liberation, and crowds gathering to express their gratitude to the police. But there have also been more cautious comments, describing "a tense acceptance of the new order."

Alsop says, "This part of the city has been generally ignored by the government and the residents are extremely distrustful of the police, who are viewed as corrupt. People are worried about the rising cost of living that will come with pacification...[but] the main fear that the residents have is that the drug dealers will come back."

Zezinho, who grew up in Rocinha and operates a favela [tour business](#) and a DJ school, says, "My fear is what will happen after the Olympic games? The police will leave and then the traffickers come back and there will be a war for the favela again."

The Rio Times

Hurricane BOPE to Make Landfall in Rocinha

With less than 24 hours before the announced invasion and occupation of Rocinha by a combination of police and military forces, I made the mototaxi ride up the hill to visit the family of Seu José, whose house I stayed at various times in 2007, 2008, and 2009. A cloud settled in over the course of the afternoon, a kind of pathetic fallacy for the tempest brewing in the machinations of the political-military complex, to a backdrop of real estate values and international media attention.



The family had just returned from making a [supply run](#), just like preparations for a hurricane or blizzard in North America – the essentials to ride out the storm, with the anticipation of spending up to three days without leaving the house. *Gatonet* (pirated cable and Internet) has already been cut, so while the rest of Brazil will watch breathless coverage on TV Globo starting live at 5am, residents of Rocinha will only have the sounds of helicopters, tanks, armored trucks, and maybe a radio broadcast, along with furtive peeks out the window.

Seu José and his daughter Walda were pensive and keenly reflective about the tumultuous events of the last week, [which began on Sunday](#) night with local boss Nem checking into Rocinha's 24-hour clinic for reasons still undetermined – Walda counteracted the press reports of a drug overdose and said the gossip around the neighborhood is that it was pure stress. She was heading to work at 6:30am on Monday morning and nearly broke down in tears to see so many armed traffickers guarding the prominently placed clinic. Since that morning, she hasn't seen a single armed trafficker. Even still, when the news broke on Thursday morning that he had been arrested, she couldn't believe it.

The family lived through the killing of former chief Bem-te-vi in 2004 and they expect an easier go of it this time, hopefully no shots fired. But they reserve plenty of suspicion for the police – a known quantity – and the military – an unknown one – that will very soon make their presence felt. Seu José's house has played host to foreign volunteers in Rocinha for social work or research for many years, and on several occasions (including one that I lived through in 2007), police incursions have resulted in confusion and a house-to-house search when a group of gringos who don't speak Portuguese well are faced with an armed cop.



The family is still unconvinced that the police/military will *stay* after a couple days – an unprecedented occurrence since drug traffickers assumed control of Rocinha in the 1980s – and there is plenty of concern about what’s next in the event of a power vacuum. If they do stay, then the specter of what happened in the Complexo do Alemão – theft and harassment by state forces – is also unnerving. A few days ago, Walda wrote on her Facebook wall: “Mais na boa acho que a UPP não vai adiantar de nada, pq os maiores traficantes ainda estão por ai soltos, roubando de terno e gravata!!!” (On the balance the UPP isn’t going to change anything, because most of the criminals are free anyway, stealing in a suit and tie!!!)”

Seu José, meanwhile, reflected on his 41 years in Rocinha, having arrived in 1970 from the northeastern state of Ceará. He remembered when there was only one bar in the whole community – which now has a commercial presence larger than many small cities – and he walked around with the receipt from his bus ticket in his pocket. The police would stop young men to check if they had a work card, and if not throw them in jail. He kept his bus ticket as proof of where he came from in case he was deported back to the northeast.

He recounted bloody tales of police attacks on drug traffickers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and when he feels Rocinha is on the cusp of a real change, that means something. For good or for ill remains the question. As he puts it, “Everything irregular is going to stop.” That means that his pirated TV/Internet is gone, and I was asked for advice on which Internet provider to use. While the family claims they were satisfied with their pirated service, they are prepared to pay a little more and have a formal contract. Sky TV has been blitzing the streets of Rocinha to sign up residents now that their cable connections have been cut – it’s a sad commentary on Brazilian society that getting TV back is the biggest priority, but now a typical routine in newly-occupied favelas.

A silver lining for Seu José’s family has been the relative quiet since last weekend. The 24-hour cacophony in Rocinha has slowed to a murmur – don’t expect to hear a baile funk tonight on Rua 2, or tomorrow night in Clube de Emoções, or the pagode party where Nem gave his tearful farewell last Sunday. The bar on the corner that has been doing live forró every weekend at earsplitting volumes has also stopped. Pacification has sonic implications alongside the socio-political ones, undoubtedly. For this evangelical family, of course, they are just as happy to see the baile funk shut down, and wish it had come sooner so they could have gotten a better night’s sleep before the national college entrance exam a few weeks ago.



I bade them farewell and headed back down to the bottom of the hill, passing a usual Saturday afternoon’s business – bars doing a brisk trade in beers and billiards, stores selling clothes, crowds coming in from the beach, a stray barbershop or beauty salon – with one exception. Pirate CD and DVD sellers were fireselling their wares, laying out trash bags on the sidewalk that eager patrons were scouring for good titles. Everything must go for 1 real a piece as Hollywood movies, sertanejo albums, hardcore porn, and live funk shows are likely to be swept up in the same dragnet that is looking for guns, drugs, and cash. Piracy funds terrorism indeed.

The entrances to Rocinha were choked with journalists, TV cameras, military police, and more Sky TV reps (the only, I might add, to actually walk into Rocinha rather than mill about at the bottom). The media spectacle of the war next door – Rocinha lying in the midst of one of Brazil’s highest concentrations of wealth and power – will surely keep eyes glued to the tube all day long from the safe

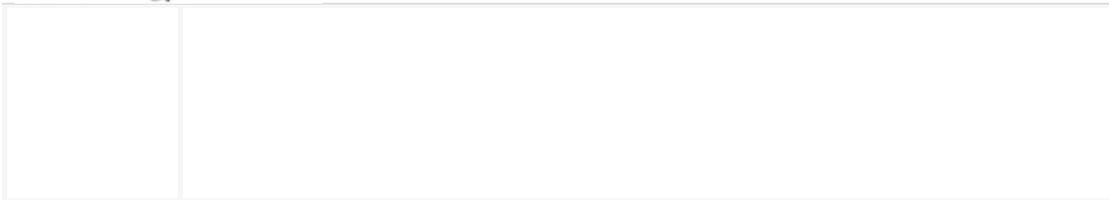
confines of gated condos or summer houses. For the unlikely 150,000+ who are about to endure the next several days of armed military occupation, they'll have to be content with whatever movies they scooped up from the *camelôs*.

<http://rioonwatch.org/?p=2492>

BOPE, community business, drug traffic, Pacifying Police Unit (UPP), piracy, police brutality, Rocinha, South Zone

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The New York Times



November 13, 2011

Rio Slum Is 'Pacified' in Advance of Games

By *SIMON ROMERO*

RIO DE JANEIRO — About 3,000 police officers and soldiers moved into one of the largest slums here on Sunday in a pivotal effort by the government to assert control over lawless areas of the city ahead of the 2014 World Cup and [2016 Summer Olympics](#).

In an operation that began before dawn, military helicopters buzzed the sky, and tanks rolled through the narrow streets of the Rocinha slum. Elite police squads patrolled the alleys, and snipers perched on rooftops.

The authorities said the occupation was an effort at the “pacification” of the sprawling slum, or favela, and it was carried out peacefully. By early Sunday evening, the police, accompanied by contingents from the Brazilian Army and Navy, had not fired a shot.

Under the government plan to assert control over the favelas in Rio, the authorities have brought in specially trained community police officers and have tried to improve basic services. But the process has not always gone smoothly. Street battles last year in the Complexo do Alemão, [a patchwork of slums](#), left more than 30 people dead before security forces won control of the area.

The operation in Rocinha — which is located above some of Rio's most exclusive residential neighborhoods — was considered the most important step yet in the effort to impose order.

Officials said the operation's success was made possible by months of intelligence gathering and by [the arrest last week](#) of Antônio Bonfim Lopes, the drug lord known as Nem, who was said to have effectively ruled Rocinha.

"Some say it's good; others say it's not," said Nilson Ferreira, 31, a doorman who lives in Vidigal, a slum near Rocinha that was also occupied on Sunday by soldiers and the police. "For me, it's fine," said Mr. Ferreira, who watched the police clean an area where drug traffickers had thrown oil to prevent vehicles from passing.

The occupation of Rocinha and Vidigal, which command spectacular views of Rio, is also a crucial phase in the crackdown against drug traffickers that control many of the city's slums.

The preparations to enter Rocinha, a hillside community of more than 80,000 people that has a thriving assortment of businesses and an emerging tourism trade, involved months of planning, officials said.

Critics said the operation, called "Shock of Peace," seemed somewhat overdone, given the relative calm in Rocinha compared with the atmosphere in other favelas in Rio, a city with a population of 11.8 million.

"The helicopters flying overhead are more Coppola than Vietnam," said Luiz Eduardo Soares, a security expert and author, in a Twitter message that referred to the movie "Apocalypse Now," the director Francis Ford Coppola's fictional account of the Vietnam War. Mr. Soares also criticized the news media frenzy ahead of the operation, saying that it fed the middle class's exaggerated fears.

Still, the operation allowed officials to highlight the security gains of recent years, which have made parts of the city considerably safer. Rio's security chief, José Mariano Beltrame, said on television that the Rocinha operation had returned "dignity and territory to those who haven't had them for 30 years."

Searches by the police in the Laboriaux area of Rocinha turned up drugs and caches of weapons and ammunition. The police also guided journalists through the luxurious three-story villa of a Rocinha drug trafficker called Peixe, or Fish, who was arrested last week, showing them his hot tub, swimming pool and collection of imported spirits.

But such displays belied the sense of normalcy that prevailed in Rocinha on Sunday. With the authorities surveying the scene from helicopters, residents gathered to chat while sharing tall bottles of beer. The wheels of commerce also began turning as they had before the incursion.

“Sign up right now,” the vendors for a satellite television service called out to residents. “When there is an operation,” a salesman, Ronaldo Oliveira, 46, said, “there is greater demand.”

Taylor Barnes contributed reporting.