

## Can Brazil's Gun Buy-Back Plan End Violence?

Contributed by Sam Logan  
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Marcelo Itagiba's office is immaculate. His desk is a fine piece of furniture, built of beautiful wood and adorned with intricately designed carvings. Two cell phones, three land lines, and a radio surround his organized work space.

One phone or another rings every few minutes, some attended, others not. He speaks fast and to the point, and does not repeat himself. This is a man who measures his time not in money, but in lives.

Itagiba is the Sub-Secretary of Public Security for the state of Rio de Janeiro, and, principally, the city of Rio de Janeiro .

Rio is one of the most violent cities in the world, where 80,000 people died of firearm-related deaths between 1999 and 2003; where nearly every other day an innocent bystander is killed by a stray bullet misfired by kids not yet old enough to vote or join the military.

The urban guerrilla war that rages around the drug trade here has reached unprecedented levels of violence and brutality.

One goal motivates Itagiba—to keep the citizens of Rio de Janeiro safe. He's convinced Brazil's new gun control law, the surrounding disarmament campaign, and an aggressive gun buy-back program are excellent tools for gaining new momentum and broad-based support for his uphill battle.

### Buying Your Way Out of Violence

Since it entered into force on July 19, 2004, Brazil's disarmament law has been more successful than anyone anticipated and has reignited hope for peace in the most violent corners of this country.

The new gun control law stipulates that any citizen in possession of a firearm can turn in the weapon to the Federal Police and receive a direct deposit of cash in his or her bank account.

Participants also receive amnesty if the weapon is illegally owned—an important clause since 90% of personal firearms in Brazil are illegal.

The nation's first gun buy-back program was inaugurated by the Ministry of Justice to implement the gun-control law.

A pistol is worth US\$ 33.00, a rifle or shotgun US\$ 66.00, and an automatic weapon US\$ 100.00. In a country where the minimum wage is less than a dollar a day, and a city where unemployment topped 10% last June, turning in a firearm in exchange for more than you might earn in a month is an attractive option. But no one thought it would see such quick success.

Within six weeks after its inauguration, journalists, academics, and others were predicting the disarmament campaign would double the government's original estimate of 150,000 to 180,000 purchased firearms.

Fernando Segóvia, Commissioner of the National Arms Service of the Federal Police, expects the original number to more than triple.

All over Brazil, the Federal Police are taking in firearms by the dozens. Over 50,000 were collected in the first month, or an average of 1,821 a day, compared to the 13,000 seized in all of 2003.

Nearly 95% of the arms that Brazilian criminals use were made in Brazil . Many were purchased for legal purposes but eventually found their way into criminal hands through theft or other means.

“The idea here is to reduce the number of guns in society so there are less available to criminals,” argues Segóvia.

“By removing guns from communities, we also cut down on accidental or wrongful death within families and the inappropriate use of arms by minors,” he adds.

Simply put, too many people have had easy access to firearms for too long. And they are cheap.

“I can sell a whole stash of used .32 revolvers and .36 caliber snub nose pistols in a day, for between US\$ 5 and US\$ 25 a piece,” said one arms dealer here, who preferred to remain unidentified.

“If you throw in a little extra, I'll hand you the weapon fully loaded and ready to rock,” he added with a wink.

Brazilian citizens are so exasperated with the daily violence that they are jumping at the chance to play a personal role in making their lives more secure.

States with high levels of violence, such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Pernambuco, have bought back huge numbers of guns.

Authorities in Paraná, a state bordering Paraguay in the south, recently held a public gun destruction ceremony where a tractor rolled over a pile of some 2,500 firearms. Over 20,000 arms have been collected in Paraná alone.

As enthusiasm for the new program increases, some experts say it could even provide a model for the United States and other great powers, such as Russia, China, and India, in their own battles to control the illicit trade and misuse of small arms.

Although disarmament through buy-backs has been a resounding success, the question remains: Can disarmament significantly reduce violence in Brazilian cities?

One concern is what happens if law-abiding citizens turn in their guns, and criminals do not. Another concern stems from the financial limitations of the program, especially now that demand has surpassed expectations.

By early August, cynics claimed the government would not have enough money to purchase all the weapons Brazilian citizens wanted out of their communities.

Segóvia predicts the amount needed could be as high as US\$ 59 million. The initial budget for the gun buy-back program was set at US\$3.3 million.

At the end of September, the Ministry of Justice announced that it had submitted to Congress a bill to request a supplement of U.S.\$6.8 million for the gun buy-back program. The bill has yet to pass.

Disarmament activist Rangel Antonio Bandera, a principal lobbyist and activist for disarmament in Rio de Janeiro, argues that without widespread diffusion of safe and secured collection centers, the momentum of the disarmament campaign may flat line before having a significantly positive effect on the federal level. He states that there are over 80 million illegal firearms circulating in Brazil .

"There are not enough collection centers around the country," argues Rangel . "We are working with the Federal Police to allow the use of churches and community centers as collection centers, but the process is very slow."

Rangel believes that without widespread disarmament throughout the country, a significant reduction of violence will be elusive.

There is also concern that the Brazilian military, the only governmental agency that can legally destroy arms, will not be able to keep up with the pace of arms collection.

As of 8 October, over 100,000 arms have been turned over to the Federal Police, less than 25% have been delivered for destruction, and relatively few actually destroyed.

Viva Rio, an anti-violence NGO that houses Rangel's disarmament program and the first gun collection center run by civilians, renders collected arms unusable before turning them over to the Federal Police.

"We simply can't be sure that arms turned over to the Federal Police will actually be destroyed," claims Rangel .

## Guns and Urban Violence

The gun buy-back program operates on the premise that there is a strong cause and effect link between disarmament and a reduction in violence. Yet the correlation is very hard for social scientists to prove.

"It's difficult to make [such a] link in developing countries," claims International Alert's Latin American disarmament specialist William Godnick.

"[For example] homicides have gone down in El Salvador after rising for four or five years after the war; attributing that to disarmament is a stretch given the percentage of weapons in circulation actually recovered," he argues.

This suggests that for a disarmament campaign to significantly reduce firearm-related deaths, a high percentage of guns, relative to the amount on the street, must be collected.

For Brazil , that means a penetrating, nation-wide campaign that can take a sizable chunk out of 80 million unregistered weapons in the country.

Itagiba, however, is convinced the current disarmament campaign will reduce violence in his state and city. "Many guns used by criminals in this state are made here in Brazil and illegally owned by citizens; the disarmament campaign helps us do our job by reducing the number of guns in illegal circulation that are widely available to members of organized crime here."

He adds, "Unlike other states in Brazil, we in Rio have passed legislation to reward our military police for firearms they seize from criminals."

Since then, military police in this town have been very active seizing small arms and light weapons such as bazookas, grenades, and high-powered rifles.

Their pace has notably quickened, but Rio is just one state in a country nearly the size of the United States .

Like many of the Lula government's plans for peace and well-being, the disarmament campaign will most likely encounter

financial constraints before it achieves long-term success in the minds, hearts, and lives of millions of Brazilians.

With a strong gun lobby in the Brazilian Congress, it will be an uphill battle for Rangel and other leading activists to convince politicians to loosen the purse strings.

The immediate success of the gun buy-back program could be forgotten a year from now if the program stalls for lack of funds.

Other countries in the region have virtually no form of gun control. Members of the Uruguayan Congress have made an attempt to pass a powerful disarmament bill into law in the wake of Brazil's success, but have made little progress.

Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and Paraguay have other, deeply rooted problems with the drug trade, corruption, and economic malaise to consider setting aside the necessary funds to effectively buy back guns circulating in their societies.

And it still has not been proven that gun buy-back programs reduce violent crime.

With thoughtful politics and aggressive fund-raising, Brazil may just break the mold and prove that nation-wide disarmament can significantly reduce violent crime.

In addition to making the streets of Rio safer, such long-term success could prove to the world that innovation is not always imported and that Brazilians do not need Uncle Sam, or anyone else, to tell them what's best for their country.

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