

Favela Residents in Brazil Get Deed to Their Shacks

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Brazilian officials said yesterday, September 25, they will begin mapping two labyrinthine Rio shantytowns, a first step toward granting land titles to residents who otherwise have no property rights despite living for generations in the sprawling slums.

The government will spend one million dollars to survey the Rocinha and Vidigal shantytowns that drape two mountainsides overlooking some of the city's most famous beaches, Minister of Cities Márcio Fortes Almeida said.

"A right to property is like a right to citizenship," Almeida told a ceremony inaugurating the program that was held in a humble white church wedged in the heart of Rocinha. It's a problem echoed in squatter settlements around the world.

The shantytowns, known in Brazil as favelas, sprung up at the end of the 19th century as freed slaves sought to make their home on unclaimed land mostly along the city's steep hillsides. Later migrants from the country's poor Northeast caused the favelas to swell.

Today, about a fifth of Rio de Janeiro's six million residents live in the favelas.

In recent years, the government has taken steps to incorporate the favelas that crowd most Brazilian cities into the urban infrastructure, giving names to the streets and finally putting them on city maps.

Without the land title, favela residents are unable to finance home repairs, receive credit and mail or sell their property. They can also be evicted without legal recourse - a real fear for people in a city where entire favelas have been removed to make way for commercial developments in the past.

"For many years Rocinha has been like a ghost city; these property titles will give people a chance to prove they exist," said Igor Mello, a property rights activist employed by the program.

Almeida said that in order for families to receive titles they must be able to prove they have lived there for at least five years. The program is expected to benefit more than 5,000 families in the two favelas, he said.

Since 2003, 272,000 families nationwide have received titles to property in favelas and another 450,000 families are in the process of getting them, he said.

Favela residents hope that by the beginning of next year they will have land titles, said William de Oliveira, president of the Rocinha residents association, reputed to be the largest shantytown in Latin America.

"We are called a neighborhood, but we are not a neighborhood," Oliveira said. "We lack most of the things real neighborhoods have."

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