
Brazil Hopes Mega Reurbanization Project Will Steal Drug Traffickers' Thunder

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It was a rare scene: Brazil's president and his entourage visiting a favela in Rio de Janeiro. But there he was, this Friday, November 30, president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on a surprise visit to the Cantagalo, Pavão and Pavãozinho shantytown complex, in the heart of Rio's affluent South Zone, to announce the start of a national reurbanization project.

Most of these slums have been taken by drug traffickers and are very dangerous even for the military police. But, at least for one day, authorities exercised their authority using a strong security apparatus that shut down access to the area.

Just last week, the Rio police traded gunfire with Cantagalo's drug traffickers while they searched for a suspect that they believed had caused the death of an Italian tourist in Copacabana.

It was Lula's first visit as president to a favela. Talking to a group of slum residents the president said that the poorest of Brazilians keep "the Brazilian race essence" and promised dignity to the favelas dwellers.

"When a rich person lives in the hills he is chic," stated Lula. "When it's a poor, it's slum and shame. We are not going to build mansions, we have no money for that, but we are going to turn the places where you live into a decent and dignified place, you may be proud of."

In Cantagalo, the main project will be an elevator, which will link the hilltop to the Ipanema square, where a subway station is expected to be built. The president was cheered by the residents when he told his audience: "There are people who are going to say: why do poor people need an elevator. Elevator is for poor people naturally, to go up this hill with bags, gas cylinder."

40 billion reais (US\$ 22 billion), according to Lula, will be invested in the next three years in the 13 biggest Brazilian metropolitan areas through a project known as PAC (Growth Acceleration Program).

The plan is to tackle sanitation and urbanization of the neediest communities. The state of Rio de Janeiro will get US\$ 1.15 billion of this money at a clip of US\$ 5.5 million a month, creating 10,000 direct and indirect jobs.

The government hopes that this injection of capital will weaken drug traffickers, who in some cases are the biggest employers in the favela. But the police will be alert just in case the drug lords decide to reclaim their territory.

"The money for the projects is much more than what is changing hands through drug trafficking. There's no competition there," says Vicente Loureiro, Rio's undersecretary for urbanization projects.