

At least 18 dead in Brazilian police raid on Rio favelas

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Police walking through a street with weapons drawn during the Rio favelas raid. Officers take positions during the operation on July 21, 2022 [Ricardo Moraes/Reuters]

Rio de Janeiro, July 22 (RHC)-- At least 18 people have been killed in a Brazilian police raid on a sprawling complex of favelas in Rio de Janeiro, state military police said, in the latest deadly police operation in the city's impoverished communities.

A law enforcement officer and a woman who lived in the area were among the 18 people who died in Complexo do Alemao on Thursday, while 16 others are believed to be members of organised crime groups, a police spokesperson said during a news conference.

“It’s a massacre inside, which police are calling an operation,” one woman told The Associated Press news agency, speaking on condition of anonymity because she feared reprisals from authorities. “They’re not letting us help [victims],” she added, saying she saw one man arrested for attempting to do so.

Tactical teams from Rio de Janeiro’s civil and military police raided the favela to take down a group suspected of involvement in cargo theft and bank robberies, and that invaded nearby neighbourhoods, the military police said in an earlier statement. It said about 400 officers were involved, with support from four aircraft and 10 armoured vehicles.

Thursday’s raid was the latest fatal police operation in a Rio de Janeiro favela, the likes of which have prompted concerns from rights groups for years.

In May of last year, more than two dozen people were killed in a raid in the city’s Jacarezinho favela, prompting outrage and protests among residents and spurring calls for accountability from human rights advocates and international observers.

But Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has defended police tactics in their fight against organised crime, saying previously that gangsters should “die like cockroaches”.

“I will continue to fight crime with all my strength. We will not back down from the mission of guaranteeing peace and security to the people of our state,” Rio state Governor Claudio Castro said on his official Twitter profile on Thursday.

But the state public defender’s office said in a statement that “there are signs of major human rights violations, and the possibility of this being one of the operations with the highest number of deaths in Rio de Janeiro.”

Alemao is a complex of 13 favelas in northern Rio that is home to about 70,000 people. Nearly three-quarters of residents are Black or biracial, according to a July 2020 study published by the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analyses.

After the raid, local residents could be seen bundling injured people into the back of vehicles to be taken to hospital as police watched. Gilberto Santiago Lopes, from the Anacrim Human Rights Commission, said the police refused to help.

“We had to carry them away in a beverage truck, and then flag a local resident in their car to take them to hospital,” he said. “[The police] don’t aim to arrest them, they aim to kill them, so if they’re injured, they think they don’t deserve help.”

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