Brazil's public security challenge

BRAZIL AND OTHER LATIN AMERICAN countries face a rising tide of violence and crime rooted in long-standing social and economic problems. Addressing the problem is long overdue, given its nefarious effects not only on lives and property but also on society's values.

Despite having made some progress, Brazil remains one of the most violent countries in the world. At 24.3 per 100,000 inhabitants, its homicide rate compares very unfavorably to the world average of 6.9. Throwing money at the problem seems to have been counterproductive: In 2012 federal and state governments spent about US$30 billion—16% more than in 2011—yet homicides went up by 7.8% and rapes by 18.7%.

In terms of the size of the police forces, spending on security would seem to be adequate: Brazil has 282 police officers per 100,000 inhabitants, the UN recommends 222, and the world median is 300. However, not only are police unevenly distributed among the states, money spent on public safety is not always managed efficiently. For example, in 2013, 13 Brazilian states failed to qualify for a total of US$67 million in federal funds for prison renovation or building new prisons because they either did not submit proposals to the Ministry of Justice or there were flaws in the proposals they did submit.

To fight organized crime and change the reality of Brazilian prisons, we need to invest more in prevention and treat drug use not as a security but as a public health problem. The 138,198 incarcerated for drug trafficking represent a quarter of all prisoners, and according to the latest survey by the National Penitentiary Department in December 2012, the number sentenced for drug trafficking in two years grew by 30%, from 106,481 in 2010 to 138,198 in 2012. Meanwhile, the number of all prisoners increased by only 10%. Changes in the drug laws are one reason for the disproportion: Brazilian law does not differentiate, as the U.S. does, between users of drugs and dealers.

Organized crime not only threatens society, through murder, corruption, and other means of coercion, it also undermines the ability of a government to perform its legitimate functions. The First Command of the Capital (PCC) crime syndicate is the largest Brazilian criminal organization, with a membership of 13,000 members, 6,000 of whom are in prison. Based largely in São Paulo state, PCC is active in at least 22 of the country's 27 states, as well as in Paraguay and Bolivia. In 2012 violence in São Paulo city killed 100 people, allegedly because an informal PCC truce with the police broke down. In October 2013, PCC issued threats to disrupt the World Cup finals in 2014 by launching terror-style attacks. It also threatened disruption of this year's Brazilian presidential election. Similar groups inspired by the PCC should not be ignored.

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To fight organized crime, José Mariano Beltrame, secretary of public security for Rio de Janeiro State, has proposed creation of a ministry of homeland safety to improve intelligence, gather and analyze information, and help to carry out federal and state public security policies. The current National Department of Public Safety of the Ministry of Justice does not seem up to the task.