

Children of a lesser God

HUGELY protective of its lucrative tourist industry, Rio's city fathers do their absolute best to maintain a semblance of normality for the droves of Americans who land each day for a taste of the Brazilian jet-set life.

Take the escalator up to the Christ the Redeemer statue, the cable-car up Sugarloaf mountain, or wander on to the famous beaches and you would probably not be aware that you were in a warzone which beats the Israeli-Palestine conflict in terms of the number of daily casualties.

Perhaps that is changing with the international success of Fernando Meirelles' Oscar-nominated film about Rio's drug gangs, *City of God*. Still, it seems difficult for most to comprehend that the violence in Rio's slums, the *favelas*, is on-going fact rather than artistic fiction. If anything, *City of God* plays it down.

CHILD SOLDIERS

Twenty-four year-old Rafael, his hair short and blonde as is the current favela fashion, knows it well. He was a child soldier for one of Rio's warring factions in Complexo do Maré. When we met eight people had been shot dead near his home. The day after five more were killed. The police always describe these killings as those of "suspected drug traffickers". It's not unusual and Rafael is aware that he is lucky not to be among the statistics.

"I carried an assault rifle. If the police came we had to shoot them, kill them or they would kill us. The government wouldn't do anything for us, so we said 'let's take it into our own hands'," he says. Complexo do Maré is one of Rio's bigger favelas with 120,000 inhabitants and a strategically important favela for drug trafficking. Death is a fact of life.

"We live in a poor community where violence and drugs are a daily presence. There are assaults, police shooting bandits, bandits shooting police and bandits shooting bandits. My hero was a drug dealer, a *traficante*, who I saw every day, armed, going outside doing assaults. The *traficantes* help the community in a way that the government doesn't. When my family didn't have bread or money it was always the *traficante* who helped. So I became an armed soldier [for him]," he says.

A 'soldado', or soldier, is effectively armed security for the drug gang. He is paid up to US\$1,000 a month to guard the drug-selling point in the favela and the community from invasion by police or another drug gang. The majority of minors working as salaried 'soldados' are between 15-17 years old. 'Soldados' are increasingly working as mercenaries in other favelas allied to the same drug faction.

At the foot of the hierarchy of the gang is the "olheiro", or lookout, whose job it is to warn the faction of any unwanted visitor entering the favela. They will often let off fireworks if anyone approaches. At the top of

the faction are the 'donos', or drug lords, who control the operation from inside Brazil's brutal but security-lax prisons, using mobiles to get messages out to their generals in the field.

CANNABIS AND COCAINE

It's an entrenched system and no-one can predict a way out of it. Police are poorly paid and corruption is rife. In January, 14,000 of Rio's unemployed queued for 1,500 jobs as military police, despite the inherent dangers of effectively joining a war.

Drugs sold in Rio are almost exclusively cannabis and cocaine. Crack is a problem in the neighbouring city of São Paulo, but Rio's gangs have so far refused to buy or sell the drug. Heroin, hallucinogens, ecstasy and amphetamines are largely absent.

The chief internal market is the city's cocooned middle class. Such is the wealth disparity, that cocaine is not an option for the city's poor outside the drug trade, although cannabis use is common. Government TV adverts target middle class users, showing a white teenager entering a favela to score dope, the money changing hands, arms being bought, then a blood-spattered car windscreen where someone (middle class) has just been robbed and killed.

But only 20 per cent of the cocaine which comes into Rio is destined for the internal market. This is anything between 7.2 and 44.4 tonnes depending on various estimates by different police agencies. The rest is exported to markets in America, Europe and South Africa. Rio's drug trade is marked by a heavy use of weapons, much of it military grade. Since the

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Behind the carnival image of Rio de Janeiro lurks one of the most deadly drug markets on the planet. **Gibby Zobel** reports from Rio on a trigger-happy street drug scene which has claimed the lives of 4,000 children in 14 years

arrival of cocaine in the late 1970s to early 1980s, Rio's favelas became controlled by different warring factions affecting one in six of the city's six million residents.

As such, the use and trafficking of drugs permeates all parts of society. The levels of violence are shocking. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict 467 children were killed between 1987 and 2001. In the same period, in Rio de Janeiro alone, 3,937 under-18s were killed due to small-arms-related injuries. Even with the escalating conflict, more children continue to die in Rio than in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza.

OUT OF CONTROL

Rio's Federal Police are at the frontline of a war against drug traffickers. Rio de Janeiro's secretary of security, Anthony Garotinho, admitted in May 2003 that the state was "out of control" due to the power of the drug gangs. Army tanks filled the streets for a month before, during and after the famous annual Carnival.

Although President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's Workers' Party government has so far failed in its pledge to take the anti-drug department away from the control of the military, leading members of the administration are at least advocating decriminalisation, if not legalisation.

Brazilian drug czar General Paulo Roberto Uchôa, the head of SENAD which was created in 1998 to keep in step with the US-led war on drugs, has said that "the trafficker and not the user is the criminal." And the country's justice minister Márcio Tomasz Bastos, pointedly told a congressional committee last year: "I favour the decriminalisation of drug use. I find the legal norms are deformed and mutilated and need to be reformed."

A new law passed on 12 February 2004, for the first time removed the automatic penalty of prison for "personal consumption in small quantities". Instead, those found guilty will undertake education programmes and community work. At the other end of

the scale, the National Antidrug System will increase the penalty of those found 'financing' trafficking to 20 years in jail. Before the change in the law users were liable to a jail sentence, but in practice poorly paid police would instead take bribes.

STEMMING THE VIOLENCE

Viva Rio, the biggest non-governmental organisation in Latin America, works within the favelas and with the police to try and stem the drug-related violence. Free educational and leisure courses are provided for low income police families – including manicures for the wives of officers. They also run a training course in "improving police practice" to try and bring down the number of police killings. At the same time, the NGO works in the favelas providing computer facilities and, in Complexo do Maré, a boxing club.

Luke Dowdney, 32, a British anthropologist and ex-amateur boxing champion created 'Luta Pela Paz' (Fight for Peace) boxing club in the late 1990s in an attempt to offer a way out to the favela's residents who he says have no other choices but to rely on trafficking for income. He is the author of a groundbreaking study, published in 2003, into Rio's gangs, *Children of the drug trade*.

"We are not going to change Maré but we have to start providing some positive options and create a culture of peace," says Dowdney. "It's absurd, you go up there on the hill and these kids have got military-grade weapons, grenades, assault rifles. There's a visibly armed army out on the streets every day." ■

BRAZIL'S TOP DOC CALLS FOR LEGISLATION

BRAZIL's most well-known and respected face of medicine has called for the legalisation of drugs, starting with marijuana, which is set to spark a fresh political debate in the country.

"Our politics against drugs is ridiculous. It couldn't be worse," says Dr Drauzio Varella. I think that we have to start by legalising marijuana."

Dr Varella rose to fame in 1999 with a best-selling book about his 14 years as a voluntary doctor inside Carandiru, Brazil's biggest detention centre with 7,200 inmates in the centre of the city of São Paulo. The book has now been made into the most successful film in modern Brazilian history, catapulting Dr Varella into the limelight.

"I was always against legalisation of illicit drugs but I changed my mind because I realised that we had to change," says Varella.

"It is very rare to talk about this. There is no debate at this moment. Nobody agrees with legalisation. People think 'my children will find the drugs in any corner'. But they already find the drugs in any corner – the difference is that they buy the drugs from the hands of the criminals. You know how much it costs for a stone of crack in the poor side of São Paulo? One-sixth of an American dollar. You know, it is so cheap, so cheap, that it is almost legalised. The only difference is that the dealers control the market," he says.

"We repress, and what are the practical results? Horrible. Drugs are fashion. I saw that in prison. I saw a time when everybody injected cocaine. In a few years nobody injected cocaine anymore. They smoked crack and crack will disappear and will be replaced by different types of drug. I don't believe that this repression can lead to control of drug abuse," he says.

Violent images of Rio: scenes from the film *City of God*

