

Hundreds killed in Rio de Janeiro mudslides

Rafael Azul
14 April 2010

For the second time this year, scores of Brazilians have been victimized and left homeless by storms in Rio de Janeiro state. On New Year's Day more than 50 people were killed and hundreds were left homeless in the town of Angra dos Reis. A second, much larger, storm last week left an estimated toll of more than 400 people dead and 160 missing—officials readily admit that they have no exact number.

Tens of thousands have been left homeless, and with no place to go. The storm, which disrupted electrical service and transportation in the city, also shed light on the social conditions that exist for a quarter of its residents.

About a foot of rain (284 millimeters) fell on Rio de Janeiro during 12 hours on Tuesday, April 6. The extraordinary amount of rainfall, which added to the previous day's storms, resulted in giant mudslides, which destroyed precariously built homes and businesses in the city of Rio de Janeiro and in nearby suburbs.

Most of the victims were inhabitants of shanty towns, known as favelas, hillside slums that ring this densely populated city of some 11 million, Brazil's second and South America's third largest city. Among the wounded were many first-responders, who put in long hours digging for survivors. According to some estimates, last week's rains were the worst in 44 years. The amount of rain that fell that day was the equivalent of the average for the entire month of April.

The storm affected the entire city; commercial activity was paralyzed. Hundreds of cars blocked the road tunnels that connect the city's neighborhoods. The world-famous Maracana stadium was flooded, forcing authorities to cancel the football game between Flamengo and Universidad de Chile. Public transportation collapsed; scores of bus passengers had to be rescued by fire crews.

Last week's torrential rain exposed Rio de Janeiro's gross social inequality. No section of the city and its suburbs suffered more than the favela inhabitants. Residents of Rio's Morro da Mangueiras favela were shown on Brazilian TV, huddling on the roofs of their houses and begging for help as their poorly built homes

slid downhill in a river of mud toward a canyon.

Provincial and federal authorities blame the tragedy on the poor who settled on the hillsides and on the officials that let them do it. "These people are committing suicide," declared Sergio Cabral, governor of Rio de Janeiro state. "It is irresponsible for them to remain there." His words were echoed by the nation's president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

This view was denounced by Agostinho Guerreiro, president of the Regional Engineering Chamber of Rio de Janeiro (CREA), who pointed out that government authorities allowed Morro do Bumba to exist on top of a garbage dump. "This tragedy was totally predictable," declared Guerreiro. Shantytown residents pointed out that no emergency measures had been taken to evacuate people, even though the ground was already saturated with moisture from previous rainstorms.

The mudslides were swift and deadly. In some cases the uppermost homes slid onto the houses built directly beneath them. Following the Tuesday storm, 14,000 were forced to leave their homes and seek refuge with relatives or at shelters set up in Rio public schools. Other Rio suburbs that were affected by the storm were Sao Gonçalo, Nilópolis and Duque de Caxas. The nearby city of Petropolis was also affected. On Tuesday alone, over 180 mudslides took place.

On April 13, six days after the mudslides began. United Press International reported on shortages of drinking water in the favelas. City authorities could not say when water, electricity and natural gas supplies would be restored to the damaged shantytowns. Favela residents have complained of the slow pace of relief efforts.

Though the amount of rainfall was extraordinary, the storm itself was not. Rain at this time of the year is common in Rio de Janeiro, as are mudslides. The impact of this storm was aggravated by a combination of demographic growth and decades of neglect in the construction of decent housing and storm-related infrastructures.

In common with other cities in South America (Bogota,

Mexico City, etc.) the poor in Rio de Janeiro occupy the many hills that exist in that city. Since the 1980s, these shantytowns have experienced explosive growth as waves of immigrants arrived from the countryside expelled by the lack of opportunity in the interior. Often they occupy steep and dangerous terrain.

The Morro do Bumba favela in Niterói exemplifies this process. The community had been built adjacent to a garbage dump that, in collapsing, magnified the loss of life and homes. Geologist Marcelo Motta explained to UPI that the methane gas generated by the garbage in this and other hillsides contributed to the separation of the steep hills and to the mudslides.

Rio's demographic growth in the 1980s coincided with its gradual deindustrialization and economic decline as this city was integrated into the global economy. As industries and banks shut down or moved their headquarters to São Paulo, the workforce became more informal, contingent, precarious and increasingly female. Present day Rio has the infamous distinction of being the Latin American city with the most unequal distribution of income as a consequence of the above process.

Among Brazilian cities, Rio also has the highest proportion of people living in absolute poverty (income relative to the cost of a minimal "market basket" of consumer goods.) Hand in hand with these conditions the number of people living in hillside favelas now numbers 2.4 million in Rio's metropolitan area. Many of these precariously built homes lack potable water, sewage and basic municipal services, such as garbage collection. When it rains, streams of refuse descend and accumulate at the base of these seaside hills.

In contrast to the plight of the poor, an explosion in real estate prices is taking place across the city, driven by the selection of Brazil to host the World Football cup in 2014 and Rio de Janeiro's selection for the 2016 Summer Olympics. Planned infrastructure improvements, such as upgrading regional airports and building a high-speed train between Rio and São Paulo are expected to be highly beneficial to real estate investors, both foreign and domestic.

Integral to these structural changes has been the building of walls to surround the favelas, isolating them from the rest of the city to further secure the profits for real estate investors. On one end of the social structure are gated communities with private guards that protect the mansions of the wealthy; on the other end shantytown communities are systematically walled off against their will. The misery of the poor is, in effect, subsidizing the

profits of the rich.

City authorities blame some of the effects of this storm on decades of negligence. Rio's mayor, Eduardo Paes, indicated that the necessary investment in storm drainage never took place. Brazilian President Lula's initial reaction was that before people could be helped, the rains would have to stop, "[F]loods always hurt the poor the most," he said. He also declared on television that, once the waters recede, a new drainage system would be built. At the same time, Lula assured investors that the tragedy would not force cancellation of the 2016 Summer Olympics.

Lula warned that the new drainage system would take 20 years to build, while assuring investors that Olympics-related projects would be ready in six years. In the meantime, he declared his hope that "God makes the rains go away.... Humanity cannot control the weather, and when it rains for more than 15 hours, the consequences are too great." Somewhat disingenuously, President Lula expressed shock and denounced what he called "administrative excesses" that made it possible for hundreds of thousands to live in "disorder" and on "inadequate" ground.

Aside from "favela tours," available for a price to the more daring, which bring in tourist dollars and euros, the presence of so many poor people in the city has long been a source of concern to city authorities. Last week's storm may in fact provide the pretext to move poor people away. This possibility appears not to have been lost on Lula and Cabral. In the week since the storm both suggested that favela residents be relocated out of Rio de Janeiro. Even before the rains stopped, Mayor Paes announced that the municipal authorities will remove 2,000 families from two favelas, including Rio's largest, Rocinha.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact