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BRAZIL

Fewer Slum Dwellers Thanks to Upgrading

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RIO DE JANEIRO, Mar 22 (IPS) - A United Nations report published ahead of the Fifth World Urban Forum in Brazil says the proportion of the population of this country living in "favelas" or shantytowns was reduced 16 percent between 2000 and 2010.

The U.N. Habitat report, presented before the five-day Fifth World Urban Forum - The Right to the City: Bridging the Urban Divide, which opened Monday in Rio de Janeiro, also says 227 million people around the world have moved out of slum conditions since 2000.

The U.N. Habitat (U.N. Human Settlements Programme) report, "State of the World's Cities 2010/2011: Bridging the Urban Divide", says that most of the 22 million people in developing countries that have escaped slum conditions annually over the last decade did so as a result of slum upgrading.

The same thing has occurred in this Latin American country of 192 million people.

Geographer Jailson de Souza, founder of the Observatorio de Favelas, a social organisation that carries out research on Brazil's shantytowns, told IPS that most of the families in this country who have left behind their status as slum dwellers actually stayed in the favelas, but "with more services and urban infrastructure, or neighbouring municipalities and the outskirts of cities."

De Souza, who is currently secretary of education in the Rio de Janeiro municipality of Nova Iguaçu, said the term "favela" is not necessarily synonymous with "slum."

"U.N. experts might not consider some of our most populous neighbourhoods informal settlements or slums," he said, citing La Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, classified by some as a lower middle-class or working-class neighbourhood.

He said that what has been seen in Brazil is "a steady improvement in living conditions in the favelas, which does not mean a reduction in the number of people living in those areas."

Like the U.N. Habitat report, he was referring to the upgrading of shantytowns, in areas like basic sanitation, access to health care or paved streets - improvements that do not keep these urban areas from still being classified as favelas.

In fact, some of the country's favelas have even expanded in size, such as those of Rio de Janeiro, the second-biggest Brazilian city after São Paulo to the south.

According to the Pereira Passos municipal institute, between 1999 and 2008, the surface area covered by favelas in Rio de Janeiro expanded by around three million square metres.

And the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) reported that in 2008, one-third of Brazil's 5,554 municipalities contained favelas.

But many of these neighbourhoods experienced improvements, as a result of spending on housing by governments - which has increased although it has not kept up with demand - and of rising income and employment, which has "enabled workers to spend more on their homes and seek new housing alternatives," de Souza said.

The official also mentioned the decline in rural migration to large cities like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, which has shrunk since the 1980s, partly due to economic growth in impoverished regions like the semi-arid northeast - traditionally a source of migrants - and northern and central Brazil.

This phenomenon, which has been accentuated since President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva first took office in 2003, "has helped change the geography of migration," the official said.

Marcelo Neri of the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a prestigious Rio de Janeiro-based think tank, said "there is a new middle class." Today, the middle class absorbs more than 50 percent of total income in Brazil, compared to one-third in 1992, he pointed out.

Between 2003 and 2008, some 32 million people experienced an improvement in their socioeconomic status, including 2.6 million who joined the consumers market for the first time, the economist said.

And according to the U.N. Habitat report, the number of Brazilians living in slums was reduced by 10.4 million people over the last decade, with the most significant improvement being seen in sanitation.

The report refers to certain socioeconomic policies that have been adopted and mentions the drop in the birth rate and in rural-to-urban migration in Brazil, although it notes that 54 million people still live in favelas.

But leaving or upgrading the favelas is just a first step, said Neri.

"In recent years, we gave the consumer market poor Brazilians," he told IPS. "Now it is time to give poor Brazilians a market, by offering microcredit, microinsurance, and, fundamentally, quality education."

Worldwide, 227 million people have experienced improvements in the four factors assessed by the U.N. Habitat study: basic sanitation, clean water, housing quality and population density (persons per square kilometre).

That means the world has already met one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed by the international community at the 2000 U.N. Millennium Summit: improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.

But the report also clarifies that because of population growth and the rural exodus, the absolute number of slum dwellers increased from 776.7 million to 827.6 million. (END/2010)

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