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Brazil economist: Rio slum poised for improvement

By JULIANA BARBASSA
Associated Press

One of the Rio shantytowns taken over by police this week has a population that is younger, less educated and more cut off from state services than other slums - characteristics that present a big opportunity for future financial growth, a leading economist said Wednesday.

If the peace achieved with the takeover of Rocinha is a lasting one, it could provide an opportunity for better services, access to jobs and education for people living in the steep hillside slum straddling some of Rio's wealthiest neighborhoods, Marcelo Neri said.

The community has little access to state services despite its nearness to such wealth.

Only 5 percent of its residents receive welfare and only 21 percent have running water indoors, Neri, an economist with the FGV think tank, said during a presentation of statistics on Rocinha gathered in 2008 and 2009. Only 12 percent have their trash collected regularly and just 33 percent have mail delivered to their door, he said.

Heavily armed police and military units climbed into the steep hillside communities of Rocinha and nearby Vidigal on Sunday, implementing a permanent police force that is meant to wrest control of the territory from drug dealers. The two shantytowns have about 100,000 residents between them.

The takeover was part of a series of recent efforts to show the world that officials are winning the fight against drug gangs in Rio, which will host the final soccer matches of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics.

Security experts say the efforts won't succeed without social programs aimed at improving the slum residents' quality of life.

Currently, Rocinha's residents receive very little assistance from the state, Neri's research shows. Bolsa Familia, a transfer-of-wealth program that helps poor families, has aided about a quarter of Brazil's 190 million people - but only 5 percent of the people in Rocinha.



Brazilian navy armored vehicles move into Rocinha shantytown in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Sunday Nov. 13, 2011. Brazilian police backed by armored military vehicles have invaded Rio de Janeiro's biggest slum in what experts say it's the most important step yet in bringing security to Rio de Janeiro before it hosts the final matches of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. About 100,000 people live in Rocinha, the biggest drug distribution point in Rio

- Silvia Izquierdo /AP Photo



Children carrying an artificial Christmas tree stop to watch journalists arrive in their neighborhood, the Rocinha slum, in Rio de Janeiro, Monday, Nov. 14, 2011. More than 3,000 police and soldiers backed by armored personnel carriers raced into Rocinha, Brazil's biggest slum, before dawn Sunday, quickly gaining control of a shantytown

Rocinha's population is younger and less educated than that of other Rio shantytowns, Neri said, noting that violence among young men is a top concern. Another is the lack of childcare in a shantytown where there are many young, working parents.

Because Rocinha is nestled in a wealthy part of Rio, it has long been the picture of inequality, with its crowded shacks standing just yards (meters) from expensive high-rises.

That looks like it might be about to change.

Jose Marino Beltrame, head of Rio's public safety department and chief architect of the shantytown peacekeeping program, toured Rocinha on Wednesday to hear residents' petitions for a health clinic, computer training courses and other improvements.

"We have to get work done, recover the time lost," Beltrame said at a news conference. "The windows and the doors are open. We have to push forward."

Rocinha also will get 100 additional garbage collectors, said Rio Mayor Eduardo Paes, who also visited the community Wednesday.

"The paths are open now," Neri said. "Peace was the initial, essential condition for improvement. Now we have to take advantage of this opportunity."

ruled for decades by a heavily armed drug gang. The takeover of the neighborhood was the most ambitious operation yet in an effort to increase security before Rio hosts the final matches of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics.

- Silvia Izquierdo /AP Photo



A Brazilian police officer pats a boy on the head while on patrol in the Rocinha slum in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Sunday Nov. 13, 2011. Elite police units backed by armored military vehicles and helicopters invaded the largest slum in this seaside Olympic city early Sunday. It's the most ambitious attempt yet to bring security to a town long known for its violence. The action is part of a policing program aiming to drive violent and heavily armed drug gangs out of Rio's slums, where the traffickers have ruled for decades.

- Felipe Dana /AP Photo



A Brazilian policeman patrols the streets of the Rocinha slum in Rio de Janeiro, Monday Nov. 14, 2011. More than 3,000 police and soldiers backed by armored personnel carriers raced into Rocinha, Brazil's biggest slum, before dawn Sunday, quickly gaining control of a shantytown ruled for decades by a heavily armed drug gang. The takeover of the neighborhood was the most ambitious operation yet in an effort to increase security before Rio

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Pople gather at a corner store in the Rocinha slum, Rio de Janeiro, Monday Nov.14, 2011. More than 3,000 police and soldiers backed by armored personnel carriers raced into Rocinha, Brazil's biggest slum, before dawn Sunday, quickly gaining control of a shantytown ruled for decades by a heavily armed drug gang. The takeover of the neighborhood was the most ambitious operation yet in an effort to increase security before Rio hosts the final matches of the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics.

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