

Brazil: Vivario – long live the favela!

by Tilman Wörtz

Nowhere do so many people die of gunshot wounds as in Brazil – 40,000 in 2004 alone. Just inland of Rio’s perfect beaches, a war is raging. In the neighborhood of Cantagolo, once an embattled mafia stronghold, the organization “Vivario” has succeeded in stopping the killing.

Hour after hour, Eduardo sits at the window and stares out at the houses and shanties covering an egg-shaped hill. A few alleys further, next to the junk shop blaring samba music, he often met friends to smoke weed and impress girls with his new Nikes or a pistol. On the roof terrace, only a stone’s throw away, he painted a Brazilian flag to celebrate Brazil’s reaching the World Cup finals. When the game was over, Brazil had lost to France, and the 17-year-old lay flat on his back for good. Police, firing at random, had stormed Cantagolo after a bank robbery in nearby upscale Ipanema. A bullet severed his spinal cord. That was six years ago. Since then, his scabby legs hang motionless from his slender body. A catheter leads from dingy boxer shorts to a urine collection bag under the bed. Next to it lies a package of diapers. There is no book on the nightstand – he is illiterate – just an overflowing ashtray.

“I was lucky,” he says softly. Almost all of his friends have been shot to death, including his best friend Jolo, rubbed out by a competing cocaine dealer. Two years ago it was four friends in a single shooting. They, too, were drug dealers. “They were found on a roof, each with a single shot to the back of the head,” Eduardo says. The police were judge, jury, and executioner. From his window he could overhear domestic disputes and watch his neighbors descend into the wealthy section to set cars on fire, break windows, and loot businesses.

With so many dying, it took the organization Vivario to bring something resembling peace to Cantagolo. Vivario emerged ten years ago with a mission to end the violence in Brazil’s cities. The immediate cause was a massacre of street children by police in front of the Candelaria church. Local shopowners ordered and financed the bloodbath because they were annoyed by the children’s begging.

Rio’s slaughter of the innocents was a wake-up call for researchers, businesses, artists, journalists, and politicians to begin developing strategies to reduce the growing number of trigger-happy police and criminals. They founded Vivario, organized funding, and named the anthropologist Rubem Cesar Fernandez as director. By virtue of its broad public support, Vivario was able to reach every social niche in the city, from drug dealers to cabinet ministers. Today the organization boasts 1,000 employees and 3,000 volunteers. They run projects in 354 favelas, including sports for 300,000 children and high school diploma tutoring for 25,000. They organized the public destruction, by bulldozer, of some 100,000 weapons confiscated by police.

To bring peace to Cantagolo, Vivario organizers decided two years ago, they had no choice but to apply every successful project model they knew to every sore spot in the favela: police, youth, law, culture, and politics.

Precinct House XI, Cantagolo. Sergeant Vidal, 34, faces a room full of military policemen, 16th batallion. Their automatic weapons are resting on chairs, but not their bulletproof vests or pistols. They give the commander their full attention. Sergeant Vidal lisps. He has a little pot belly and a pimple on his nose. He turns on the TV. The screen displays a graphic in the shape of a flight of stairs. It is meant to convey that conflicts can not only be solved with violence, but also verbally. "The next step is to threaten violence. Only then do you try the last step, using violence," he lisps. "Do you understand?"

A massive MP with a brush cut wrinkles his forehead. He cracks his chewing gum and says, "When things get nasty, there's no time for conversation!"

Sergeant Vidal is prepared for the objection. "If you're in danger, you can open fire. But retreating is sometimes better, especially if innocent people might be injured in a shooting."

The sociologist Veronica dos Anjos sits in the last row. She nods in agreement. Through arrangement with Vivario, she has trained Sergeant Vidal and almost 4,000 of his colleagues in "Improved Community Relations in Practical Police Work." She is testing to see how well he has retained the information. The officer has learned his lesson. "Think about it! Only two people out of every hundred in the favelas is involved in drug dealing! The vast majority are honest folk just trying to get by, like you and me." With this final warning, he releases them to the streets. Their beat curves down a steep cobblestone street. From somewhere in the maze of alleyways, fireworks climb into the sky: drug dealers' lookouts, warning them that the police are on their way.

His old unit avoided the shadier corners of its precinct. They might storm them to stop large-scale shootouts between opposing elements of the drug mafia, or when citizens of the neighboring white middle-class neighborhoods were unnerved by muggings, but otherwise they were off limits. Mafia sharpshooters perched on the roofs fired on police the minute they appeared. Sergeant Vidal knows what it's like to be a bullseye labeled "Policía" for public target practice. And he knows what it's like to fall into an ambush. He took a bullet in the back of his right knee. After Vidal's unit fought its way to its goal inside the favela, the dealers would take cover and wait for the retreat. Then the game could begin all over again.

In Cantagolo, his workday is different. He keeps watch with 16 colleagues day and night. It costs the city more, but saves lives. Their task is to show presence. They should become part of the community, hindering crime instead of responding to it. The idea of "community policing" that Vivario director Rubem Cesar Fernandez persuaded the city government to adopt originated in the U.S.

On Vidal's desk lies a letter of complaint. The inclined railway has broken down again. As a result, students are loitering on the streets instead of riding to school. Sergeant Vidal contacted the city yesterday to demand the railway be repaired. Now he strolls along a few feet behind the patrol, his hands clasped behind his back, his belly poking out. He sorts out a small traffic jam in a tight curve and says hello to two passing students. He remembers them from talks he gave on civics and sexually transmitted disease. He gestures at the surrounding houses: "There's nobody here anymore walking around with a weapon in his waistband." Before community policing

came to Cantagolo, that was different. He remembers his colleagues' laments: "Vivario has no clue. If we walk in there, we'll be dead." Seventy of the 100 policemen assigned to the project quit the force, afraid of how the drug cartels might react.

Like other favelas, Cantagolo lived in de facto anarchy: no police, no courts, no hospital, and for a long time neither sewers nor paving. Those were ideal conditions for a cocaine depot on the road from Colombia to the U.S. Vivario's first partners were local churches and a town committee. The deal was: You get sewers and paved streets from the city and education and training from us. In return, you accept community policing. Sergeant Vidal was convinced that de-escalation made him safer. He didn't resign like his colleagues, who were replaced over time with volunteers. His unit was held to one decisive tabu. They would not attempt to stop the flow of drugs. "There's too much money at stake. But we can reduce the violence that starts with the drug dealers." In Sergeant Vidal's opinion, the compromise has worked well. "Since we've been here, there have been no more murders, neither of dealers nor of police."

Hardly anyone pays attention to the passing patrol. A mother hangs laundry on a line at her window while her children play ball in the street. Merchants offer rice, beans, candy, pretzels, liquor, or plastic toys from wooden stands. The street smells of fish and rotting fruit. Drumming blares from a boom box. A few men sit on a low wall and toss some sort of effervescent tablets into a cola bottle. It's Douglas Rufino's turn. He is 21. He looks on with boredom as the foam overflows. Two of his friends smell of alcohol. All four are unemployed.

His naked torso ripples with muscle. He stands and walks up a steep path, his shower shoes slapping rhythmically against the ground. In Vivario's statistics he is in the highest risk group: male, between 14 and 25, no diploma. In Rio, 1.3 million people have failed to graduate from eighth grade. They have very poor chances of finding work. Douglas knows nothing of the statistics, but he knows the life behind them. The friends he just left behind have often invited him to join in a robbery. Occasionally he followed them down the hill into the city. He was terrified. But they're his friends, his beach and soccer buddies.

Douglas doesn't want to play along anymore. Instead of robbing shops, he prefers to ask if they might have work for him. Generally they don't. Getting ahead is impossible without connections. His mother has put in a good word for him at a private security firm where she sometimes does cleaning work. Will they trust him – with his address?

The highlight of his life was the army. He liked the discipline. At 14 he was already working in the stockroom of a five-and-dime to support his family. In his free time he learned perfect jiu-jitsu – his cauliflower ears are proof. He wanted a career in the military. But so do a lot of people. Without a diploma, his chances were smaller than the bits of meat in his Friday-afternoon *feijoada*.

Douglas strolls past the police station to a glass and concrete building that clings in a broad arc to the hill called "Morro," high over Rio de Janeiro. The building was originally intended to be the Hotel Panorama, with a view of the sea, the granite outcroppings, and the beach of Ipanema. There was to be no exit to the favela. Guests would reach the hotel by elevator from Ipanema in only 30 seconds. But the

investors ran out of money. The city seized the building and gave it back to the Morro.

Now the Hotel Panorama has a broad entrance that faces Cantagolo. On the two top floors, children from the favela learn math and reading. The two floors under them are occupied by Vivario. Children's voices mingle in the hallways with the instructions of a dance teacher and the tapping of ping pong balls. Youth play volleyball on a terrace lined with a net to keep balls from flying off into space. Nearby a whistle shrills. Bodies splash through the water, swimming at top speed. An adult wears a T-shirt that labels him "Professor." Vivario hired physical education teachers to keep children from choosing the recreational activities formerly preferred by Douglas and Eduardo. Two thousand of them participate every day.

Douglas shuffles down the hall to the library. Edvis, 15, and Camila, 14, sit with the teacher Anna-Paula at a table and cut out photographs from Norwegian tourist brochures. They glue them to a big sheet of paper, writing in the margins all they have learned about this odd land of trolls and bright wooden houses. In a week the king of Norway will be visiting the project in the Hotel Panorama. "Prince Charles was already here," Camila says defiantly. She is tired of cutting and pasting. She would rather surf the Internet on one of the 32 computers presented to Vivario by the Brazilian postal service.

Douglas descends a broad stairway to his classroom and stashes his backpack under a seat to wait until the math teacher begins class. Books and films on history, literature, geography are all gratis. "Length times width equals area," he notes. When he doesn't understand the drawings in his notebook, the wrinkles on his forehead give him away. He wants to pass the test in the next two months, and then use his certificate to apply for jobs, "Anything, I don't care what."

Vivario's job database regularly compares his resumé with newspaper advertisements. If an ad fits, Vivario arranges first contact. That counts in Rio as a reference. After all, many well-known firms, media figures, politicians, and researchers are on its board of directors.

Douglas has also applied for work directly with Vivario. The wealth of projects in the Hotel Panorama confused him enough that he turned in his application to the wrong office – the tiny legal office, accessible via a narrow hallway and two flights of stairs, deep in the bowels of the concrete colossus. All Cantagolo has gotten word that the staff there can resolve disputes without weapons. A dozen people are waiting on benches outside the office. The space behind the wooden partition is the only one in the favela where legal books are to be found, even if they are a bit battered. "Next," calls out the law student Taiana Felix, a volunteer. The client who barges in has a complex pattern of braids, a snub nose, and large eyes. Behind her comes her brother, short nappy hair, gap-toothed, same nose. The sister is exploding with rage. "It's unbearable! They live like pigs! They have to pay to put up a wall. And if they threaten to kill me one more time, I'm calling the police. Drunks! Cokeheads!" Her brother replies, alcohol slurring his words. Taiana asks for calm, to no effect.

But Taiana doesn't give up. She knows how important it is for the siblings to reach an agreement. One of them might have good contacts to a drug dealer, who will solve the problem in his own way. Their conflict-resolution scheme is always the same:

threats, then beatings, then a bullet in the leg, and then, if that doesn't work, in the head.

Taiana pays a house call. On such missions she always takes along the "Community Agent," Claudio. He has a good reputation in the favela. His very presence is quieting and prompts people to trust Taiana. Vivario has him on salary for this task alone. The sister doesn't have to tell Taiana which half is hers. Neatly piled dishes in the sink, gleaming tiles, ceramic figures, and flowers mark her territory. On her brothers' side, the refrigerator is dark with soot and verdigris. The floor is filthy. Electric cords and old blankets lie in the corners. The sister, trembling, lets a load of rhetorical buckshot fly. Her brothers shoot back. It is half an hour before they begin to listen to Taiana. She suggests they put up a wall through the middle of the living room and make a new entrance for the brothers in the rear of the house. "Going to court takes a long time and costs a lot more than a wall," she tells the sister, who is still shaking with anger. "You inherited your mother's shop," she goes on. "You can't have everything." No reaction. "Build the wall. You'll never have to see your brothers again." The sister twitches one last time and signs the arbitration papers. "We don't know if the agreement will hold," Taiana says. "But sometimes the voice of reason is enough to make people open to compromise."

The story doesn't make *Vivafavela*, the web site that chronicles the doings of the shantytowns. Its correspondent in Cantagolo, Rita de Cássia, 40, applies strict criteria in her choice of themes. She hunts down stories in a black dress and a huge blow-dry hairdo, today in the Rainbow Beauty Salon. The broad-shouldered boss gets nervous and starts scratching the tattoos on his upper arm as Rita holds up the tape recorder. "What styles do your customers like best?" she asks. Slowly at first, then picking up speed, he tells of permanents, reflex treatments, and "mega-hair" – hair extensions for ten dollars apiece. They hang on the rim of a large mirror that bears the message "Property of Jesus Christ."

"I write about our dignity, about the feelings in our hearts," Rita reassures him. Romanticism is her stock in trade. At 13, she was writing love letters for illiterates. The hairstylist voices his support: "The big newspapers only write about murders and drugs in the favelas. They don't care what our life is like. To them we're just criminals, not people."

Cantagolo has no print newspaper. That would be too expensive. The stylist has never seen *Vivafavela*, but he has heard about it from neighbors who read it regularly on the networked computers in the Hotel Panorama. Rita shows him a few articles from her archive – Cantagolo's first transvestite, neighbors helping neighbors, last week's soccer tournament, jealous women. "She was here yesterday," the hairstylist says gleefully, pointing at a photo of a young woman. For the article she had confessed to hitting her boyfriend merely because he spoke to another woman. The hairstylist knows more about her than is written in the article. She is an excellent rapper and boxer. But that a newspaper would write about her – wonderful!

Rita has to rush. In one hour the editorial conference begins at Vivario headquarters. She glides in the elevator from the impoverished world of the Morro 26 floors down to Ipanema, where luxury cars cruise in front of the Palace Hotel, where apartment buildings with doormen in the lobbies are protected by cast-iron barriers and video cameras.

Rua Ipanema runs along the beach. Rita takes the bus past the Copacabana into central Rio, to the Villa Venturoza, a white colonial building with shutters of dark wood and a wrought-iron gate. Three women handle the reception desk, forwarding calls to 300 employees in the capacious offices behind them. Keyboards clatter, the telephone rings constantly, and a French artist explains, complete with hand motions, how she would like to illuminate the statue of Christ on Corcovado Hill all in blue. “*La couleur de la paix*,” the color of peace, she insists. The correspondents, photographers, and editors of *Vivafavela* gather around the table in the conference room. “What are our themes tomorrow?” asks the editor-in-chief, Cristiane Ramalho, 40. She worked for large Brazilian newspapers and magazines for 20 years. Now she wants to bring the favelas into the digital age. “The people don’t just need food and medicine. They also need information and high-quality entertainment.” The cartoon character Cambito, a boy in a ball cap with the dream of escaping the poverty and violence of the favelas, has a growing fan base, not only in the favelas but also in rich white neighborhoods. The staff can tell by the style of the letters to the editor. Over 12,000 people visit the *Vivafavela* web site every day.

“The internet lets the poor and wealthy parts of Rio, the favelas and the asphalt, grow into each other,” says Cristiane Ramalho. The daily *O Dia* regularly brings articles by *Vivafavela* correspondents. A dozen journalists call Ramalho every week to get information on the favelas. They don’t dare go there themselves. Four months ago, when police shot and killed four innocent people after mistaking them for drug dealers, it was *Vivafavela*’s reporting that led to an investigation by a special commission in the Ministry for Human Rights. Larger media came late to the theme.

Rita pitches her story about beauty salons. “Limit yourself to one or two storefronts,” says the editor-in-chief. “Last week we had an article about a soccer game with 22 quotes, one from every player. Almost all of them said the same thing.” But there are so many nice salons, Rita counters. Eventually she gives in. She checks to see if her hair is holding up and says, “They cut my articles too much. I think I’ll write a book, a book about the most beautiful favela in the world!”

A dark wooden staircase leads to the third floor of the Villa Venturoza, where Veronica dos Anjos is typing her report on the last police training course and coordinators are evaluating the weeks’ cases. The sponsors expect activities to be well-documented. In a niche of the Disarmament Department, however, it is quiet. Vivario’s chief lobbyist, Antonio Bandejas, 38, needs quiet to concentrate on persuading congress to strengthen the firearms law, when he’s not knocking on their doors in Brasilia. His mane of gray hair falls smoothly down his back. With assurance he pulls a study from a cabinet. “A third of confiscated weapons were originally bought legally and then sold on the black market. Most of them are made in Brazil. If we stop them at the source, fewer weapons will get into the hands of the drug dealers.” For two years, he and his coworkers examined countless handguns and rifles in police warehouses. They wrote down the serial numbers and compared them with gun licenses – a unique effort. Until now, no city in Brazil other than Rio has allowed anyone to look into its arsenal.

Antonio Bandejas can produce a study to suit any client. “Almost 80% of the population thinks plainclothes police shouldn’t be allowed to carry weapons.” That makes politicians think. Business interests, which donate almost half of Vivario’s

budget, are most easily convinced by the cost-benefit analysis of violence prevention. “Eight percent of the GNP goes for security. The private sector in Brazil invests 20 million Euros, twice as much as the public sector.” The petroleum giant Petrobrás and industrial associations together give a million Euros annually, making them Vivario’s largest donors.

Numbers are the ammunition in Antonio Bandejas’ battle against the gun lobby, which is said to bribe congressional delegates. But the clincher is his own life. “I know what the bad effects of weapons look like.” He fought against Brazil’s military government as a guerrilla, became an adviser to Allende in Chile, and was on the scene for his violent downfall. He didn’t feel safe again until he had become a professor of political science in Canada.

After 20 years, he returned as a consultant to the government of a greatly changed Brazil. The former guerrilla fighter was now afraid to walk the streets at night. “The weapons and the violence came with the cocaine. Weapons change the nature of a conflict. Without them, the murder rate would be lower. So we need to make weapons dealing more difficult.” His cell phone rings and he digs it slowly out of his white linen pants. “Yes, next week, the protest march in Arancaju – we hope TV Globo will be there, as it was in Rio.” A scriptwriter for Brazil’s most popular soap opera, *Passionate Women*, killed off a main character with a ricocheting bullet from a shootout. Now he wants to shoot on location as the friends of the dead man join a Vivario protest march against private weapon ownership.

“We organized the march,” Antonio Bandejas says exultantly. A bit of vibrato is heard in his otherwise firm bass voice. Around 70 million viewers, rich and poor alike, will see in the next episode of *Passionate Women* how 50,000 demonstrators marched on the Copacabana in the rain. Among them were actors but also genuine victims of ricocheting bullets who, like the former drug dealer Eduardo, are confined to wheelchairs. Some limped on crutches, holding up placards with Vivario’s demands. Three months later, President Lula signs the weapons reform bill into law. He invites Antonio Bandejas and representatives of other peace organizations to join the solemn ceremony in the presidential palace.