Source: Americas Program

Urban peripheries in Third World countries have become war zones where states attempt to maintain order based on the establishment of a sort of "sanitary cordon" to keep the poor isolated from "normal" society.

"Army sources confirmed that techniques employed in the occupation of the Morro da Providéncia *favela* [slum] are the ones Brazilian soldiers use in the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Haiti."
1

This admission by Brazilian armed forces largely explains the interest of Lula da Silva's government in keeping that country's troops on the Caribbean island: to test, in the poor neighborhoods of Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, containment strategies designed for application in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and other large cities.

But the news published by the daily *Estadão de São Paulo* goes farther in revealing the military's
modus operandi
. The commander of the 9th Motorized Infantry Brigade in Haiti, William Soares, directed the occupation of Morro da Providéncia by 200 soldiers, who installed machineguns on "the community's only plaza, transformed into a military base," which were later withdrawn in order to facilitate a dialogue with the population. In the meeting with the Residents Association [Asociación de Pobladores], General Soares "promised projects, a Christmas party with gifts for the children, a vacation camp, film screenings, medical, and sanitation assistance."

According to the newspaper, "in exchange, the Army is gathering information on the slum and its inhabitants. Soldiers filmed and photographed the meeting and the entire troop deployment." General Soares made all those promises in order to "diffuse the revolt by community leaders against the social project programmed for the slum."

Urban Poor as a Threat

Urban theorist Mike Davis analyzes urban peripheral areas in terms of a commitment to social change. A single sentence synthesizes his analysis: "It's the slum peripheries of poor Third World cities that have become a decisive geopolitical space."[2] He asserts that Pentagon strategists are lending great importance to urban planning theory and architecture, since the peripheries are "one of the most challenging terrains for future wars and other imperialist projects."

In fact, a study by the United Nations estimates that one billion people live in peripheral neighborhoods outside Third World cities and that the poor in the largest cities in the world number some two billion, that is, a third of all human beings. These statistics will double within the next 15 or 20 years, and "all future growth of the world's population will occur in cities, 95% of it in cities of the Global South and the majority in slums."[3]

The situation is much more serious than the numbers indicate: urbanization, as Davis explains, has become disconnected and autonomous from industrialization as well as from economic development, which implies the "structural and permanent

disconnection of so many city dwellers from the formal world economy." On the other hand, he notes that, "over the last decade ... the poor—and not just the poor in classical urban neighborhoods [with high levels of organization]—but ... this new poor, on the fringes of the city, have begun organizing themselves massively ... whether that's Sadr, in Iraq, or an equivalent slum-based social movement in Buenos Aires." 4

In Latin America the main challenges to elite domination have arisen in the heart of poor urban areas—from the 1989 "Caracazo" riots to the Oaxaca Commune in 2006. Proof of this are the popular uprisings in Asunción in March 1999, Quito in February 1997 and January 2000, Lima and Cochabamba in April 2000, Buenos Aires in February 2003, and El Alto in October 2003, just to name the most relevant cases.

Even more, urban peripheries are spaces from which subaltern groups have launched the most formidable challenges to the system, becoming a sort of popular counter-powers. Davis is right: control of the urban poor is the most important objective planned by governments, global financial organisms, and the armed forces of the most important countries.

Many large Latin American cities seem to border at times on social explosion, and several have erupted over the past two decades for various reasons. Fear among the powerful appears to point in two directions: postpone or make unviable the explosion or insurrection, and, also, avoid the consolidation of those "black holes"

outside state control, where the main challenges to the elites occur.

New Military Strategies

In recent years, publications on military thought as well as analyses by financial organisms have dedicated ample space to challenges presented by gangs and to debates on new problems arising from urban war. The concepts of "asymmetrical war" and "fourth generation war" are responses to problems identical to those created by Third World urban peripheries: the birth of a new type of warfare against non-state enemies, in which military superiority does not play a decisive role.

William S. Lind, director of the Center for Cultural Conservatism of the Free Congress Foundation, asserts that the state has lost its monopoly on war and elites feel that "dangers" are multiplying. "Almost everywhere, the state is losing."[5] Despite supporting pull-out from Iraq as soon as possible, Lind defends "total war," which engages enemies on all fronts: economic, cultural, social, political, communications, and also military.

A good example of this full-spectrum war is his belief that

the dangers for United States hegemony lie in all aspects of daily life, or, if you prefer, in life itself. For example, he believes that "in Fourth Generation War, invasion by immigration can be at least as dangerous as invasion by a state army." New problems rooted in the "universal crisis of the legitimacy of the state" have "non-state enemies" at the center. This leads him to conclude with a double warning to military leaders: no state military has succeeded against a non-state enemy.

This problem is at the heart of new military modalities of thinking, which must be completely reformulated to face challenges that used to correspond to "civilian" areas of the state apparatus. Militarization of society in order to regain control of urban peripheries is not enough, as revealed in recent military experience in the Third World.

Military commanders deployed in Iraq seem to be clearly aware of the problems they must face. Cavalry Division Commander General Peter W. Chiarelli, based on his recent experience on the outskirts of Baghdad in Sadr City, maintains that security is the long-term objective, but it will not be achieved through military action alone. "Executing traditionally focused combat operations ... works, but only for the short term. In the long term, doing so

hinders true progress and, in reality, promotes the growth of insurgent forces working against campaign objectives."[6]

This implies that the two traditional armed forces lines of operation—combat and the training of local security forces—are insufficient. Therefore, three "nontraditional" lines of operation should be undertaken; ones that previously corresponded to the government and civil society: essential services provided to the population, building a legitimate government, and empowering "economic pluralism," that is, a market economy.

With infrastructure repair projects they attempt to improve the situation of the poorest sector of the population and, at the same time, create employment opportunities to send visible signs of progress. In the second place, creating a "democratic" regime is considered an essential point for legitimizing the whole process. For United States commanders in Iraq, the "point of penetration" of their troops occurred with the Jan. 30, 2005 elections. In strategic thought democracy was reduced to producing a vote.

Finally, the recruitment ability of the insurgents can be reduced through the expansion of market logic, "by 'gentrifying' city centers and creating business parks," that become a dynamic sector stimulating the rest of society. [7]
From then on, the poor population in urban peripheries becomes, in military jargon, "the strategic and operational center of gravity."

This combination of mechanisms is what the major global powers' armed forces today consider the means to achieve "true long-term security." In this way, "democracy," expansion of services, and a market economy will cease being citizens' rights or morally desirable objectives and become gears in a strategy of military control over a population or a region of the world and, of course, its resources.

Security and Cooperation: Two Faces of a Strategy

Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) "has played an increasingly prominent role in the War on Terrorism."[8] U.S. development programs are not directed toward the

population that most needs them, but rather to the most "at-risk populations and regions," according to Pentagon strategy.

For military strategists like U.S. Army Colonel (Ret.) Thomas Baltazar, USAID programs "can play a crucial role in denying terrorists sanctuary and financing by diminishing the underlying conditions that cause local populations to become vulnerable to terrorist recruitment. Moreover, USAID programs directed at strengthening effective and legitimate governance are recognized as key tools with which to address counterinsurgency."

The Pentagon's strategy is to assure security for the United States, and to this end, it uses "democracy" and "development assistance" as complements to military operations. The U.S. National Security Strategy maintains that "development reinforces diplomacy and defense, reducing long-term threats to our national security by helping to build stable, prosperous, and peaceful societies." 9

It seems necessary to emphasize that international cooperation, development aid, and the war against poverty—some of the favorite slogans of the World Bank and other financial agencies—are merely strategies to control and subordinate the population that is "potentially" rebellious or resistant to the objectives of U.S. multinationals. The Pentagon's analysis of African reality, according to Colonel Baltazar, identified "the causes of extremism," highlighting among others the existence of "large marginalized and/or disenfranchised populations, and exclusion from political processes, as key causes of instability in the region."

Electoral democracy and development are necessary to prevent terrorism, but they are not objectives in and of themselves. In countries with weak states and high concentrations of urban poor, the armed forces move to take the place of the sovereign government, reconstruct the state, and in a totally vertical and authoritarian manner, initiate mechanisms to assure the continuation of domination.

In Iraq, these policies have their obverse and complement in the building of large walls to separate neighborhoods in Baghdad. According to writer and Arab expert Santiago Alba Rico, the construction of walls in 10 neighborhoods in the Iraq capital is intended to turn each into "an armored closet whose inhabitants are filed away or abandoned in locked drawers and sealed enclosures." 10

The logic is simple: "Neighborhoods that have not been crushed militarily are walled, enclosed, and abandoned to their luck. Complete areas of the city have been demarcated and segregated with inhabitants confined inside, subjected to entry and exit controls so ironclad that we can speak without hesitation of a ghetto policy."

Other parts of the world are not lacking in cement walls to isolate and separate peripheral neighborhoods. Symbolic walls are fabricated according to differences in color, dress, and ways of occupying space. But the results and objectives are identical. Control mechanisms—whether dressed in

military garb, or as NGOs for development, or promoting market economy and electoral democracy—are interlaced and, in extreme cases like the suburbs of Baghdad, the slums of Rio de Janeiro, or the shanty towns of Port-au-Prince, they are subordinated to military planning.

In Brazil, to give just one example, different forms of control are simultaneously applied: the "Zero Hunger" government plan is compatible with the militarization of the slums.

In his reflection on Nazism in "On the Concept of History," German writer Walter Benjamin declared that "the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of exception in which we live is the rule." United States policy since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, fits the concept of a "state of permanent exception." The "state of exception," which suspends civil rights and militarizes areas and complete nations, is applied in an indiscriminate way to different situations and for different reasons, from internal political

problems to external threats, from an economic emergency to a natural disaster.

In effect, the state of exception was applied in situations such as the Argentine economic-financial crisis that burst into a broad social movement in December 2001, the response to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and the containment of the rebellion by poor immigrants in the peripheries of French cities in 2005. The common thread, beyond circumstances and countries, is that in every case it is applied in order to contain the urban poor.

End Notes

1. Dantas, in *Estadão* (São Paulo).
2. Davis, interview.
3. Davis, "Mike Davis on a Planet of Slums."
4. Davis, interview.
5. Lind, 13.
6. Chiarelli and Michaelis, 15.
7. Chiarelli and Michaelis, 13.
8. Baltazar and Kvitashvili, 38.
9. Cited in Baltazar and Kvitashvili, 38.

10. Alba Rico.

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