

Puerto Rico operation seeks to fulfill law and order



SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — Soldiers in camouflage carrying M-16s check every passing car. They stand guard alongside schools pockmarked with bullet holes. They patrol nightly along lines where workers are putting up 12-foot walls, topped with barbed wire.

Reminiscent of El Salvador and Vietnam, this military operation is taking place on U.S. territory, battling the enemy within — drugs, gangs and violent crime.

Hundreds of National Guardsmen and police have taken over 23 public housing projects in this U.S. Caribbean commonwealth since June, often in swift nighttime operations complete with helicopters, armored personnel carriers and shouted orders to residents.

Gov. Pedro Rossello ordered the Guard into action, seeking to lower a murder rate worse than any of the 50 states and to fulfill

a law-and-order campaign pledge. It is the first time American military units have been pressed into routine crime-fighting service with police.

The takeovers have ended shootouts at the projects and brought back frightened repairmen, mail carriers and social workers. The operation also has been criticized as undemocratic by civil rights activists.

For Santo Almodovar, repairing his corner snack shop inside the rundown Vista Hermosa (Beautiful View) project, the takeover has returned something he thought was lost forever — security.

As he spoke with a reporter, workers were busy nearby walling off the project to stop foot traffic and building a guardpost at the single remaining street entranceway to control vehicles.

"It's a shame that we have to live in forts like the cowboys against the Indians, but it works," said Almodovar, 44, surveying empty streets that used to be

crowded with outsiders, many buying or selling drugs.

"They kill fewer people in some of these guerrilla wars in Latin America than they do here," he said.

From 1980 through Monday, killings claimed 8,204 lives in Puerto Rico, with new murder records set in 1991 and 1992. The 706 people killed so far this year — including five in one recent shootout at an unpatrolled housing project — is well above the 617 at the same point last year. Police say 85 percent of the slayings are drug-related, in a land where unemployment is officially listed at 17.5 percent.

From the windows of her office in a nearby elementary school, Principal Armenda Perez used to watch drug sales, some by children not much older than those she teaches and tries to protect.

On Christmas, gangs shot up her school for target practice. Another time, panicked mothers, who got wind of a shootout, pulled half of the 320 pupils out

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— Armenda Perez, elementary school principal

of school within 20 minutes. During another gunfight, Perez huddled in her office, metal shutters drawn, with about 30 children. A man was fatally shot outside of the adjoining cafeteria — a half-hour before the children recessed.

"The press was afraid to come in here," said Perez, a veteran educator from the rural central mountain town of Utuado. "This phone — it stayed broke for a month because repairmen didn't want to come in. The school doctor was afraid to come."

Vista Hermosa was not even considered one of the worst of Puerto Rico's 332 housing projects, which are home to 332,000 of its 3.8 million people. When it was built three decades ago, private guards rang a siren at 9 each night to tell children to head home. But order disappeared as many residents with jobs left, as its population doubled, as services crumbled, as drugs took hold and never let go.

Now each night, police and guardsmen patrol the streets of the projects, or watch TVs at streetside while earning money, a cause of resentment to some jobless residents.

In Lopez Sicardo, a housing project near the University of Puerto Rico, residents complain that authorities have closed the community center to public events and banned the weekend block parties they used to hold near the project's small, litter-strewn square.

"It's a dictatorship," said a 40-year-old man who would identi-

fy himself only as Pedro for fear of the authorities. "At 10 o'clock, you have to turn off your stereo in your house."

Pedro said police continue to check the cars and papers of project residents they already know. He called it harassment. One policeman is under investigation for the shooting death of a resident who was trying to enter a housing project Sept. 8.

The island's police chief, Pedro Toledo, counters criticism by saying residents from 50 other projects have demanded that authorities move in.

The government has not said how much the operation has cost. About 500 guardsmen and police officers take part in the initial sweep of a project, then 30 or so are assigned to daily patrols.

Those doing the patrolling find themselves face to face with a part of the island that Puerto Rico tries its best to hide.

Sgt. Ishai Boria, waiting out an afternoon rainshower under the awning of a former drug-selling point, said the occupation of Vista Hermosa reminded him too much of Vietnam, where he fought in 1969 and 1970 as a soldier in the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry.

And like Vietnam, it may have been easier to get in than get out. Although the government and the newly private management of the projects have made some repairs, several root problems remain: the size, the concentration of people and the lack of ways to keep criminals from living there.

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