

THE WORLD

BY GABRIELA SÁ PESSOA
AND MARINA LOPES

SÃO PAULO — Fatima Mendes tightens her grip on her dogs' leashes as she crosses a street in the hemisphere's largest city. The narrow sidewalks here are cluttered with people draped in blankets, many lying down. Drug users pick through trash bins in search of items they might sell for a few reals — enough to secure the next fix. They carry away a wheezing boombox, worn tennis shoes, busted combs.

Dawn is breaking over Crackland.

It's been two months since hundreds of drug-addicted people spilled into Mendes's neighborhood, and her morning walks have been tense ever since. Now, when she goes to the gym, the retired tourism manager takes only her key. She avoids going out at night at all.

"You become a prisoner," says Mendes, 58. "You cannot bring your cellphone with you when you are out, even if you are going to work. You have to be constantly on alert."

Brazilians call it Cracolândia: a 30-year-old colony of hundreds of drug users and dealers under the control of the First Capital Command, the city's most powerful gang, across more than two dozen blocks in downtown São Paulo. It's one of the world's oldest and largest open-air drug markets, moving an estimated \$37 million of product each year.

Since crack cocaine engulfed São Paulo in the 1990s, nearly every city administration has proclaimed victory over Crackland, only to see it resurge, whack-a-mole style, in a different location, to the horror of the residents and business owners affected. Successive governments have tried approaches ranging from tear gas and rubber bullets to free housing and treatment.

In 2019, President Jair Bolsonaro signed a law to allow police and security to commit addicted people to hospitals by force. Former president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who is challenging Bolsonaro in the October election, says he would consider limiting prison terms for users and redefining definitions of drug trafficking to exclude smaller quantities.

Now Crackland is on the move again. The latest in a decades-long series of police crackdowns this year is pushing the squatters beyond their long-standing boundaries and into adjoining neighborhoods.

"It is an impressive social and economic phenomenon," says Mauricio Fiore, a researcher at the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning. "It is more than a dilemma — it is unsolvable."

The only way to break up Crackland, he says, is to raise the cost of staying for users and dealers, either by populating the area with other, more desirable people or by making life so difficult they leave.

Elbio Marquez walks three blocks into the heart of Crackland, past people with open wounds and crutches, to open the heavy iron gates of Cristolandia church. His bright yellow uniform is stamped with "Jesus transforms."

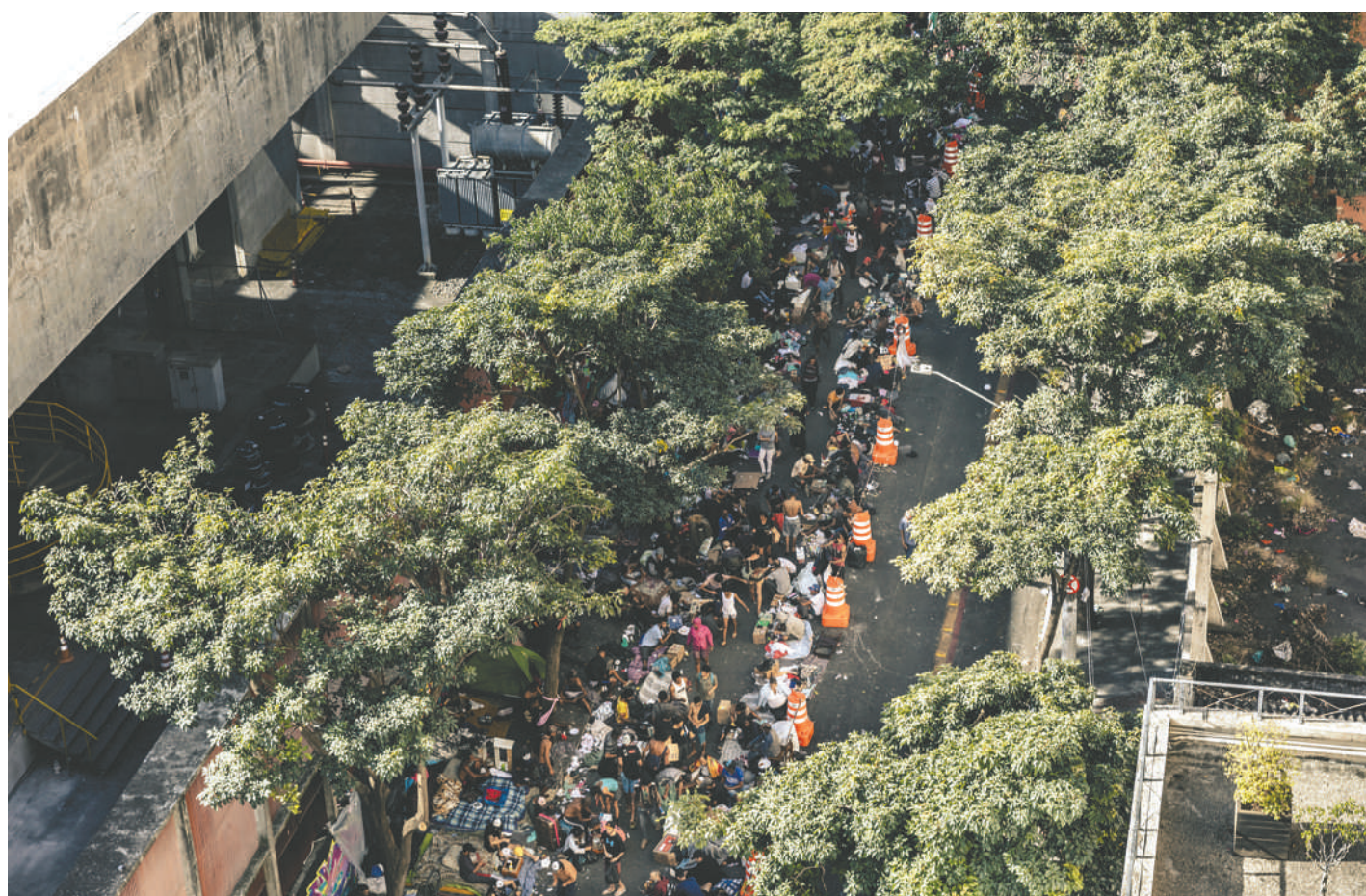
"Coffee? Shower? A change of clothes?" he offers to the people gathered.

Suddenly, people rise to move. Run, run, they whisper. "Run where?" asks one man, confused.

Across the street, a line of police officers, armed and grim-faced, orders the gathering to disperse. As people run, a tear gas bomb goes off.

The chaos jars amid the architecture of downtown São Paulo. Crackland sits next to the Sala São Paulo, the extravagant theater that serves as headquarters for the city's symphony orchestra, blocks from the Pérola Byington women's hospital, and close to the Pinacoteca, one of the country's most important museums of modern art. It's not only a public health nightmare but also a real estate headache.

Until recent months, traffickers had full control of the region. But



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Crackland is one of the world's largest and oldest open-air drug markets. Fatima Mendes has changed her daily routine in her neighborhood. Volunteers at Cristolandia church walk in the empty streets of a former location, hoping to provide water and spiritual support. Crack user Valdomiro Sousa Lima, 58, in front of the Cristolandia social center.

PHOTOS BY GUI CHRIST FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Crackdown and consequences

Pressure on São Paulo's Cracolândia pushes drug dealers and users beyond their usual confines



since the beginning of the year, police have launched a series of invasions to arrest traffickers and disperse users. Police say the operations have led to the arrests of several prominent traffickers.

"We unrooted the problem. We broke the economic cycle of Crackland," says Alexis Vargas, head of strategy for São Paulo's city police force.

The approach has shrunk Crackland from a height of 4,000 people in 2017 to a few hundred today. But as people disperse, residents in neighborhoods that were never affected are locking their doors and shutting down their businesses.

The police are urging neighbors to be patient as Cracklanders move through the city. "There needs to be resilience," Vargas says. "Organized crime is resilient, so the public also has to be."

At Cristolandia, 16 men and two women agree to attend a service in exchange for food, a bath, and new clothes.

"The first time you use crack, that's it. Your life is over," says Alan Felipe, 32. He says he has not used in five days. Before he quit, he says, he stole electronics and items from the local market to sell for crack. But life in the last few months has grown more difficult: "They send us from one place to another. You are hit with rubber bullets, pepper spray."

Jittery and anxious, he says he'll seek help from a government treatment center after the service is over. With a 9-month-old daughter, he's determined to stay clean. "It is a battle. You have no idea how hard it is."

Valdomiro Sousa Lima, 54, says he has been using crack for 13 years. He pulls a homemade pipe, crafted from a car antenna, from a bag. "Now there is no place to stay. We have no space to gather. Everyone is spaced out."

Aldino de Magalhães runs a restaurant that has been in his family for generations. But sales have plunged 50 percent since the day in May when, without warning, addicted people moved into his block. "It was worse than the pandemic," he says.

The newcomers, he says, have stolen cables and metal from the outside of his store. Customers have stopped coming by — some, scared of the addicted people; others told to work from home until they disperse.

Maria Inês Sene, 61, was leaving her home. Sene has lived near Crackland since it began. Until this year, she says, she was able to walk and bike here without fear.

Now the noise of the drug market keeps her awake at night. Before she walks out her door in the morning, she looks out the window to judge the mood. If the users seem calm, she says, she leaves. If she sees fights or chaos, she waits.

In May, she was returning home from the supermarket at dusk when four men blocked her path and demanded her bags. "What am I supposed to do at that point?" she asks. "It is hard to explain what I was feeling, a mixture of panic and fear. Of course, I see the human being in front of me, but I also felt so vulnerable being surrounded by four men."

Now, she doesn't leave the house past 5 p.m.

As night falls, Livia Pereira da Silva sits on a park bench, watching her son climb a tree. Unemployed and pregnant, she has been squatting in Crackland with her five children for years.

"I have never had any problems with the users," she says. "The problem is with the clashes. My problem is with the police." During police operations, school is canceled, bullets fly and she closes the doors of her apartment to keep out the tear gas.

But the users give her kids cookies and toys, and they don't smoke in front of them. Once, when her children were playing outside and got lost, a user brought them home. "If people saw them up close, they would have a different view," she says. "Before they are drug users, they are human beings."

DIGEST

NIGERIA London museum will return looted artifacts

A London museum agreed Sunday to return a collection of Benin Bronzes looted in the late 19th century from what is now Nigeria as cultural institutions throughout Britain come under pressure to repatriate artifacts acquired during the colonial era.

The Horniman Museum and Gardens in southeast London said it would transfer a collection of 72 items to the Nigerian government. The decision comes after Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments

formally asked for the artifacts to be returned earlier this year and follows a consultation with community members, artists and schoolchildren in Nigeria and Britain, the museum said.

The Horniman's collection is a small part of the 3,000 to 5,000 artifacts taken from the Kingdom of Benin in 1897 when British soldiers attacked and occupied Benin City as Britain expanded its political and commercial influence in West Africa.

The British museum alone holds more than 900 objects from Benin, and National Museums Scotland has 74. Others were distributed to museums around the world.

The artifacts include plaques, animal and human figures, and items of royal regalia made from brass and bronze by artists working for the royal court of Benin. The general term Benin Bronzes is sometimes applied to items made from ivory, coral, wood and other materials as well as the metal sculptures.

Nigeria, Egypt, Greece and other countries, as well as Indigenous peoples from North America to Australia, are increasingly demanding the return of artifacts and human remains amid a global reassessment of colonialism and the exploitation of local populations.

— Associated Press

Suspected Islamists kill about 20 in Congo attacks: Suspected Islamist militants killed about 20 people in attacks on two villages in eastern Congo over the weekend, the army and a local human rights group said. Fighters believed to be from the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) killed residents and burned down houses in the villages in Ituri province, said a coordinator for the local group Convention for the Respect of Human Rights. A spokesman for the army confirmed about 20 deaths and said Congolese forces were in pursuit of the assailants. The ADF is a Ugandan militia that moved to eastern Congo in the 1990s.

Dozens detained as police break up Shiite gathering in Kashmir: Police detained dozens of people in Indian-controlled Kashmir as they dispersed Shiite Muslims attempting to participate in processions marking the Muslim month of Muharram. Scores of Muslims defied security restrictions in parts of the main city of Srinagar and took to the streets. Muharram is among the holiest months for Shiites and includes processions of mourners beating their chests while reciting elegies and chanting slogans to mourn the death of the prophet Muhammad's grandson Imam Hussein. Sunday's procession marked the eighth day of Muharram, two days before its

peak on the day of Ashura.

Gunmen kill 4 in attack on lawmaker in Pakistan: Gunmen fatally shot four people, including two police officers, in northwestern Pakistan in an attack targeting a provincial lawmaker from former prime minister Imran Khan's political party, police said. Lawmaker Malik Liaqat Khan, no relation to Imran Khan, of the Movement for Justice party and three others were wounded in the attack, police said. No one claimed responsibility for the assault, which occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which is governed by Imran Khan's party.

— From news services