Brazilian Soldiers Stage a Raid in Revenge

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To Brazilians, life is too often an incident they've seen before and likely will see again. But to North Americans, it was an indication of Latin America's frequently cavalier regard for civil authority — the kind of problem that makes Latin governments uncomfortable outside their borders.

On the night of Feb. 1, with the temperature at its normal 95 and air conditions humid and sultry, 12 armed men, described as members of the Domínio Club, a well-known Rio "clique joint," ventured into the streets of Rio de Janeiro's fashionable Lagoa district, a dark room full of bullet holes and broken glass.

The doorman was dead, cut down by gunfire. The bartender was hospitalized with bullet wounds in the head. Several other patrons were wounded. Some observers said another man was dead, but the bodies were removed so quickly no one was sure.

The Domínio Club was raided by "lawmen"? Hardly. The newspaper Correio da Manha called the incident a "military operation," and explained: "A detachment of paratroopers under the command of two lieutenants sealed off a street in order to find the eight club members with machine guns, hand grenades, and tear gas.

The attack, carried out by uniformed paratroopers wearing black greasepaint on their faces, was simply a matter of vengeance.

Several weeks ago, an army sergeant was beaten to death at the Domínio, after a dispute over the size of his bill. A few days later, an army captain stopped in the club and said the army intended to evict it. The sergeant was one of nine men slain by the doorman and several others. About 10 days passed; then the army convened the squad to order.

As the sergeant arrived at the scene the street was cordoned off at both ends by soldiers with fixed bayonets and machine guns. Some bodily—some dead, others still alive—were being put into trucks. A large crowd hovered around the entrance to the Do
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The sky was getting light. Several blocks away, a few early-risers already were out on Copacabana Beach. In the car park of the Lagoa de Mendonca, where the body of the doorman had lain, was a large smear of blood and some trampled flowers. Several cars were rid
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On the sidewalk in front of the Domínio was a band grenade. Had it gone off inside the club, the grenade could have killed many revelers. But even without the grenade, it's a wonder more people weren't slain.

The soldiers had burst through the door, ordered everybody to lie down on the floor, and sprayed the entire room with machine gun fire. The owner, the main target of the raid, escaped into another night club. One patron, grabbing the soldier's shoulder, and shot him with it. Another patron fled, then pulled a pistol and wounded one of the pursuing soldiers.

The Rio police were not in on the Domínio attack. They have problems of their own. The newspapers and the papers have reported a half-dozen cases of police killing vagrants and beggars, driving them into narrow rivers that flow into Guanabara Bay.

So far, two policemen have been arrested. One was said to have been dismissed from the force. The newspaper Jornal do Brasil called for an immediate investigation of the beating, saying that policemen are suspected of "summarily applying the death penalty to individuals considered bad elements."

But the policemen dismissed from the force often go to work as doormen or bouncers for clubs like the Domínio. Brazilian night clubs are not known for patience or generosity. "Ballerina" named Maria, fired from a club in a small town near Rio, recently accused the owner of "transforming the backyard of his club into a cemetery."

The girl reported that "customers who cannot pay the bill, or protest the amount, are invited to have a talk with him in the backyard, where they are shot and buried." The police promised to investigate. The Domínio affair wasn't the first time the Brazilian military has taken vengeance measures. In 1964, for instance, the armed forces deposed President Getulio Vargas, and later drove him to suicide, after he sent gunmen to liquidate an opposition publisher. The soldiers were upset because the gunmen accidentally killed an air force major instead.

Today the army, acting in commando-style vengeance on night clubs, too, but the recent incident was the first time anyone had been killed in the process. Raided one club owner afterward: "What am I supposed to do the next time a soldier appears? Should I treat him with kid gloves, or they'll come in and shoot me like an animal?"

The basic problem is hardly unique to Brazil: When civil authority is weak and often corrupt, the military gets power by default.

—HUNTER S. THOMPSON