

International

# Exploding ATMs: Brazil banks wrestle with dynamite heists

An average of two banks or ATM machines robbed every day

SAO PAULO: More than two dozen heavily-armed men stormed into the center of Guararema early on a recent morning, rousing the Brazilian town's residents with the sound of broken glass, explosions - and then gunshots. Brandishing high-powered rifles, wearing bullet-proof vests and carrying several kilos of dynamite, the gang pulled up in front of the town's main police station. It then set upon an adjoining branch of Banco do Brasil, shattering its windows and doors with crowbars.

In a coordinated 3 am attack, police said, other gang members hit a Banco Santander Brasil branch two blocks away. They detonated the dynamite in an attempt to blow up ATM machines and vaults in both banks. Such attacks have become commonplace in Brazil: Last year, an average of two banks or ATM machines were robbed every day, mainly in small towns without a major police presence.

The spoils can be substantial. Each ATM has four boxes storing up to 2,700 bills apiece, meaning one cash machine stuffed with 100-real bills can yield up to 1 million reais (\$263,000). Bank robbers skilled with dynamite - working quickly - will often blow up several ATMs at each bank or go directly for their vaults. To combat the robberies, Brazil's banks have invested in anti-theft technology, ranging from specialized ATMs to facial recognition cameras.

When that fails or the costs become prohibitive, they have simply closed branches: as a result, some towns no longer have easy access to financial services in a country that already has a higher proportion of "unbanked" residents than either China or India. The rash of bank robberies reflects just one way in which widespread violence is taking a toll on Latin America's largest economy, pushing frustrated Brazilians to elect President Jair Bolsonaro in October on a promise to crack down on crime.

"Crime seeks opportunities," said Rafael Alcadijani da Silveira, a public security expert at the Getulio

Vargas Foundation, a think tank in Sao Paulo. "In Brazil, organized crime is very strong, security in small towns is weak and bank raids seem like an easy crime to commit." In the Guararema bank robbery, police pursued the gang to a nearby highway, where the two sides exchanged gunfire. Eleven gang members were killed by police.

**Nowhere to bank**

Brazil's banks, which spend \$2.3 billion on security each year, have made headway against the gangs. Bank raids fell 20 percent last year, to 758 attacks, according to news reports and police records compiled by an association of private security workers, known as Contrasp. The tally, which has declined steadily since 2014, does not capture the rising scale of heists like the one in Guararema.

Whereas criminals once knocked over individual ATMs in the street, banks have now moved their machines into bank branches where robbers often blow open a whole row at a time - which only shows up as a single attack. The shift in tactics illustrates how criminal gangs are adjusting to added security measures by banks, warned Leandro Vilaim, business and operation director at bank industry association Febraban.

"There is no silver bullet," he said. "These measures are short-lived because attacks are always changing in nature. When banks squeeze the bandits, they find a new way out." Cash machines sold in Brazil, at up to 150,000 reais each, cost roughly double those in the United States. That reflects the price of tamper-resistant technologies including explosion-resistant safes, ink that stains bills when cash machines are dynamited

and an average of 10 specialized sensors to respond to attacks - all of which drives up costs.

"Brazilian ATMs are so robust that if the country was bombed in a war, only cockroaches and ATMs would be left," said Vilaim. Other countermeasures include ear-piercing sirens, strobe lights and even fog machines traditionally used at night clubs, deployed to stun thieves. And Brazilian lender Ita? Unibanco Holding is investing in cameras that can identify thieves even when they use disguises. Then there is the ultimate deterrent: shuttering a town's branch altogether - an increasingly frequent solution that is leaving a growing number of small Brazilian towns without a single bank or ATM.

Some 200 towns that had at least one branch as recently as 2016 now have none at all, according to the country's central bank. That is sometimes the result of normal cost cutting, but in many cases a direct result of multiple robberies at the same branch, according to bank executives. Closures have left some towns with no source of cash, prompting several local prosecutors to file suits against the banks, seeking to reopen the branches.

"The main complaint in those cities comes from merchants. People don't have cash to buy stuff, so it affects the local economy," said Glauber Tatagiba, state prosecutor in Minas Gerais, who has filed suits against lenders. The southeastern Brazilian town of Minduri, for example, lost its sole branch, run by Banco do Brasil, in July, forcing its 4,000 residents to travel 22 kilometers (14 miles) to S?o Vicente de Minas to withdraw funds.

Months later, thieves blasted the ATM in Sao Vicente de Minas, so customers had to head 33 km in the other direction to the nearest bank in Cruzilia,

whose own branch had only recently reopened after an explosion. "It is tough situation especially for pensioners, who have to travel to withdraw money as few merchants take cards here," said Minduri municipal administrator Lucas Magalhaes.

**Armored cars and rifles**

What sets Brazil apart from other regions where ATMs are targeted, including parts of Europe and Africa, are the frequency of attacks, according to security experts, along with Brazilians' explosive of choice. In other parts of the world, explosive gas is usually used to blow up ATMs. But Brazil's gangs have shown a taste for dynamite, usually stolen from mines and construction sites. One dynamite stick strategically placed in a cash machine can send thousands of bank bills flying within seconds, ready to be bagged by waiting accomplices. Preparation, however, takes much longer, as the thieves carefully put together gangs of at least 10 people, each with their own skill set.

Gangs are equipped with high-powered military gear, often including tactical bulletproof vests, gloves, balaclavas, armored cars and .50 caliber rifles, said Pedro Ivo dos Santos, who heads the anti-bank robbery task force in Sao Paulo. Even if the thieves' equipment is second-hand or stolen, he added in an interview, the price tag for such an arsenal would run around 400,000 reais. Many police departments don't have the resources to compete.

Once a gang targets an ATM, they assign specific jobs to perform during what typically amounts to a four-minute robbery. Some scatter metal road spikes to pierce the tires of police cars, for instance, while others specialize in opening the cash machines and inserting dynamite. "ATM bombing is just the tip of the iceberg. Thieves usually start by robbing banks and later on use the proceeds to finance drug trafficking, in a move they see as career development," said commissioner Santos. — Reuters



**Brazil banks investing in anti-theft technology**

## Elephants, planes, rebels: Indonesians set for jumbo polls

JAYAPURA: From sending ballot boxes by elephant in Sumatra to keeping voters safe in Papua's rebel territory, Indonesia is pulling out all the stops for one of the world's biggest one-day polls across a vast archipelago of 260 million. Today, over 190 million registered voters in the Muslim-majority country will cast their votes in just eight hours of polling, with the election commission battling torrential downpours, voter fraud and damaging cyber attacks.

And if that wasn't hard enough, the world's third-largest democracy behind India and the United States is staging a first for its two-decade-old system, which rose from the ashes of a military-backed dictatorship: holding presidential, parliamentary and local polls all in one day. "This is a very big country so we'll do our best," Arief Budiman, the commission's chief, told a recent gathering of journalists and diplomats. "But we're very busy this year." He's not kidding.

Calling on four-legged transport, motorbikes, speedboats and planes, officials have been distributing cardboard ballot boxes - guarded by armed security staff - to every corner of the 4,800 kilometer (3,000 miles) long archipelago, which is home to hundreds of ethnic groups and languages. While elephants carried ballot boxes through Sumatra's Aceh province, horses were used to reach to remote communities in the southeast corner of Java island. "The path is muddy during the



LOMBOK: A worker delivers ballot boxes by horsecart to remote villages in Gili on the eve of the country's general elections. —AFP

rainy season so we need to use horses to transport election material," said Suhartanto, the police chief in Tempurejo sub-district, who goes by one name.

The lightweight ballot boxes - replacing metal ones used in previous polls - are up to the job, Budiman insisted, declaring them to be "very strong". "You can sprinkle water on them - but not a flood," he said. This was confirmed this week near Jakarta when hundreds of spoiled boxes were left in a muddy heap after torrential rain flooded a storage warehouse. Plastic bags are being inserted into the boxes to protect millions of ballot papers in a tropical country used to pounding rainstorms.

**'Communal voting'**

A record 245,000 candidates are vying for public office, with current president Joko Widodo facing off against ex-general Prabowo Subianto for the top job. The polls

kick off today at over 800,000 plus ballot stations staffed by millions of election officials, starting in easternmost Papua where a separatist insurgency has simmered for decades. Security will be tight in parts of the mountainous region after rebels massacred more than a dozen employees at a state-backed contractor in December. Violence also erupted as election material was delivered before local polls last year, resulting in the deaths of several police and election officials.

But armed rebels aren't the only election challenge in Papua, which shares an island border with independent Papua New Guinea. Voters in parts of the mineral-rich region use a communal voting system called "noken", in which a village head collects votes and represents the group at the ballot box. It is a challenge to the concept of direct voting and a headache for local officials who have tried - and failed - to change the fraud-prone system in a country where vote buying is already rife. — AFP

## India Court considers call to open mosques to women

NEW DELHI: India's Supreme Court agreed yesterday to consider a petition from a Muslim couple to allow women into mosques, seeking to overturn a centuries-old practice that largely bars women from the places of worship. Women are not allowed inside most mosques in India although a few have separate entrances for women to go into segregated areas.

The petitioners, Yasmeen Peerzade and her husband Zuber Peerzade, said that women were allowed to enter mosques during the time of the Prophet Mohammad. "Like men, women also have the constitutional rights to offer worship according to their belief," they said in their petition. "There should not be any gender discrimination and allow Muslim women to pray in all mosques," they said.

The court last year lifted a ban on the

entry of women of menstrual age at a Hindu temple in southern India saying it was a violation of their right to worship. The Muslim couple referred to the temple ruling, which angered conservative Hindus, as a precedent to support their call for women to be allowed to pray at mosques. A representative of a prominent organization of Islamic scholars, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, was not immediately available for comment. The petition comes at a sensitive time for relations between minority Muslims and the majority Hindu community.

Some members of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist ruling party have been accused of stirring communal animosity as the party seeks a second term in a staggered general election now underway. Supreme Court judge SA Bobde said the court will examine the couple's request at length. The court in 2017 ruled as unconstitutional a law which allows Muslim men to divorce their wives simply by uttering the word "talaq", which means divorce in Arabic, three times. This year, the government issued an executive order making instant divorce an offence punishable with up to three years in jail. — Reuters



NEW DELHI: Indian Muslim students chat after taking exams at Fatehpuri Masjid, in the old quarters of New Delhi. —AFP

## Japan, US struggle to find crashed jet and its 'secrets'

TOKYO: One week after an F-35A stealth fighter jet crashed off the northeastern coast of Japan, US and Japanese military vessels are struggling to find the wreckage and protect its valuable "secrets." The Japanese jet vanished from the radar on April 9 over the Pacific as it was conducting a training mission with three other aircraft some 135 kilometers (85 miles) east of Misawa, northeastern Japan.

A defense ministry spokesman told AFP that the remains of the jet's tail had been found but they were still hunting in vain for the rest of the fuselage, as well as the pilot. "On average two aircraft, including a helicopter, and two patrol vessels are constantly deployed in the around-the-clock search operations," said the official, who asked to remain anonymous. Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force has also dispatched an unmanned submersible vessel.

Separately, the US military has dispatched one military aircraft and one vessel to join the mission, said the official, adding that the search



ASAKA: A file photo shows F-35A fighter aircraft from the Japan Air Self-Defense Force taking part in a military review at the Ground Self-Defense Force's Asaka training ground in Asaka, Saitama prefecture. —AFP

has not yet been scaled back. Defense Minister Takeshi Iwaya said the crash would be discussed at a meeting with his US counterpart in Washington on Friday, which will also involve the two allies' foreign ministers. "The F-35A is an airplane that contains a significant amount of secrets that need to be protected," Iwaya told reporters. "With the help of the United States, we will continue to take the leading role in investigating the cause of the accident," he said.

**'State-of-the-art'**

Akira Kato, a professor of international politics and regional security at Tokyo's JF Oberlin

University, said rivals China and Russia would have "a strong interest in collecting even a single screw of the state-of-the-art plane." And Hideshi Takesada, a defense expert and professor at Takushoku University in Tokyo, said it would not be a surprise if Moscow and Beijing were engaged in undercover activities to find some of the debris. "Even if Japan and the US find it, they may not disclose details, including its exact location, due to concerns that China and Russia might try to collect it," Takesada said. Japan's defense ministry confirmed it had not spotted any suspicious vessels or aircraft from a third country near the site. — AFP

## Ecuador suffers 40 million cyber attacks after Assange arrest

QUITO: Ecuador said yesterday it has suffered 40 million cyber attacks on the webpages of public institutions since stripping Wikileaks founder Julian Assange of political asylum. Patricio Real, Ecuador's deputy minister for information and communication technologies, said the attacks, which began on Thursday, had "principally come from the United States, Brazil, Holland, Germany, Romania, France, Austria and the United Kingdom," as well as from the South American country itself.

Assange was arrested and carried out of Ecuador's embassy in London on Thursday after President Lenin Moreno removed his diplomatic protection following seven years of self-imposed exile in the building. Moreno accused Assange of interfering in the "processes

of other states" and "spying." As well as overturning Assange's asylum status, Ecuador stripped him of the nationality he was given in 2017 under the government of Moreno's predecessor Rafael Correa.

Javier Jara, undersecretary of the electronic government department of the telecommunications ministry, said the country had suffered "volumetric attacks" that blocked access to the internet following "threats from those groups linked to Julian Assange." Hardest-hit were the foreign ministry, the central bank, the president's office, the internal revenue service, and several ministries and universities. However none of those institutions reported either the theft of information or the elimination of data. —AFP