

# Jail deaths spark protest in Chile

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Over 12,000 prisoners throughout Chile went on strike last month in protest over the death of 26 inmates in a fire in a jail in the northern city of Iquique. The strikers were demanding an end to the chronic overcrowding and brutal regime in Chilean jails that led to the Iquique fire.

The fire started on May 21 when a number of inmates set light to a mattress to protest the death of a fellow prisoner, Jeanete Soto. She set fire to herself after being denied the right to visit her dying brother in hospital. Soto's death was the last straw in a number of incidents at the prison, including constant lock up and brutal treatment by prison guards.

Inmates told the media that when prisoners raised the alarm about the fire, a nearby guard scoffed at them remarking, "I will call another guard after I finish my cigarette". As a result the prisoners who were locked in tried to break down the bars to escape the burning cell block. Still the guards refused to open the cell doors—leaving the inmates trapped. At the time only three guards were on duty, in charge of 1,400 prisoners.

The 26 victims were aged between 18 and 22. They were all either awaiting trial, serving time for minor offenses such as stealing, or in some cases had not even been formally charged.

The day after the Iquique tragedy, inmates at the prison in Puente Alto, a town southeast of the capital Santiago, launched a solidarity strike to demand improved prison conditions. The Puente Alto prisoners confront similar conditions. One section holding 80 inmates, for instance, has just one water basin, three faucets with potable water and four toilets. The strike spread rapidly to other jails.

The Chilean media initially reported that the Iquique deaths were the result of a riot of "extremely violent elements and drug dealers". But as inmates explained, a riot only broke out after firefighters entered the burning block and prisoners saw their fellow inmates dead, in

some cases literally stuck to the walls and floors of their cells.

A top prison official later admitted that there was virtually no chance of survival as the prison has "no fire hoses, and the small number of fire extinguishers are either faulty or too small."

The ill treatment of prisoners at the Iquique prison is well known to their families. In fact, after hearing of the fire, they gathered outside the prison, hurling abuse at the guards entering and leaving the facility. At one point family members blockaded a guard's car demanding to know why nothing had been done to save the men's lives. Local police broke up the crowd with tear gas and rubber bullets.

Five days after the fire, the families held a march throughout the city, holding up placards of their dead relatives and chanting, "justice, justice". They condemned the guards responsible for the deaths, and declared that the protests would continue until the local magistrate provided answers.

An aunt of one of the deceased explained to a local newspaper: "We don't want money, we only want to know the truth as to why nobody went to the aid of the boys who were crying desperately for someone to open their cells. Our children are no longer alive but this won't be just brushed under the carpet. They were young, mostly first time offenders, many in jail unjustly. Just like my nephew who didn't even have any official charges against him and was awaiting trial."

The Iquique fire is not an isolated incident. Last December seven prisoners died, also burned to death, in a prison in San Miguel, a suburb of Santiago. In that case, a gas cylinder exploded causing the fire, but again prisoners were locked in, unable to save themselves. Only three guards were on duty in a facility that housed 1,700 prisoners but was built to hold just 711. The fire sparked an outcry leading to a strike involving some

10,000 prisoners. None of their demands were met.

The level of overcrowding has reached extraordinary proportions in the decade since the ruling Concertacion coalition came to power. At the start of 1990, Chilean jails held nearly 24,000 prisoners. Now the figure is 35,991 and the country has the highest rate of incarceration in Latin America—233 prisoners per 100,000 head of population. It is double the global average.

The high incarceration rate is largely due to rising levels of unemployment and social hardship, which drive many young people to crimes such as stealing. In the last two years alone, the number of people detained for petty theft rose by nearly 40 percent. At least a quarter of the crimes were reported in the poorest communities and just under two thirds of the offenders were aged 15 to 24.

The government has implemented a “zero-tolerance” policy in 1999, which has resulted in the incarceration of many young people who have not been tried or in some cases even charged. In fact, some 60 percent of the prison population is awaiting trial.

The result is a huge overcrowding problem—nearly 36,000 prisoners are held in facilities originally designed for 23,035. According to the UN Latin American Institute for Crime Prevention, prison overcrowding in Chile is one of the worst in Latin America, surpassed only by Panama and Costa Rica. Some 45 percent of all inmates are aged between 16 and 29 and only 18.7 percent successfully completed primary education.

In many respects, the current situation is worse than under the Pinochet’s military dictatorship. For instance, after the prison riots of 1980, the regime was condemned internationally for overcrowding in Santiago’s San Bernardo Prison. The institution was originally designed to hold 800 and had 1,800 inmates in 1980. In the third quarter of 1990, it housed 3,300 prisoners and now holds even more.

Chile is often held up as an example of the success of free market policies but the so-called economic boom of the 1990s has led to a widening gulf between rich and poor. The income of working families has decreased in real terms and the distribution of wealth is one of the most unequal in Latin America. The bottom 10 percent of Chilean households receive only 1.5 percent of the national income, while the top tenth

receives 41 to 42 percent—some 28 times more.

The city of Iquique, which was traditionally dominated by primary industries, including copper and nitrate mining, has been turned into a free trade zone. As jobs in older industries have been axed, young people have been forced into low-wage, often casual employment in small manufacturing firms, or are out of work altogether. Unemployment is in double digits for the first time since the recession of 1982—currently the official figure for Iquique stands at 17.2 percent as compared to 11 percent nationally.

The government has responded to the crisis in the prison system by calling for more jails to be built. In an address to the nation on the day of the prison fire, Chilean President Ricardo Lagos, a member of the Socialist Party, stated: “Doubling the capacity of Chile’s prison system is the only way we have to tackle this problem”. The proposal has nothing to do with alleviating the desperate conditions in Chilean jails but is to make way for even more of the country’s young and poor caught up in the government’s “zero tolerance” dragnet.



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