

81 prisoners die in Chile penitentiary fire

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Eighty-one prisoners died in a fire Wednesday at the San Miguel Prison, south of Chile's capital city of Santiago. Fourteen others were hospitalized in serious condition. The deaths and injuries provoked angry protests from relatives.

This is the most serious prison fire in Chile's history and the third most serious fire of any kind in terms of the number of victims. The fire began in the early morning hours and quickly spread. An inmate appears to have phoned the fire department from his cell phone.

The severity of the fire was originally blamed on the slow response by fire fighters. Some of the relatives at the scene reported that prison authorities were slow in allowing the fire trucks entry into the prison. Whatever the precise circumstances, the real reason for this tragedy, the worst in the history of Chilean prison history, is the decrepit, understaffed and overcrowded state of the nation's penal system.

The fire began in the third story of the prison and appears to have rapidly spread, fueled by burning mattresses. It was first sparked during a fight between inmates. The section of the prison where the fire began housed about 200 prisoners.

As the fire began, hundreds of relatives were queued up waiting to enter the prison—Wednesday is visitors day at San Miguel. When they saw the flames, many of them attempted unsuccessfully to break in to help rescue their loved ones. Later on, as Santiago's Mayor Fernando Echeverría read out the names of the dead, relatives threw rocks and bottles at the public official. So far, only 31 of the dead have been identified. Fifty others were so badly burned that they were unrecognizable. Identification can only be made from dental records.

The prison, originally designed for a population of 700, had 1,960 inmates at the time of the fire. In his initial comments, and in response to charges from the prison guards union, Chilean President Sebastián Piñera

admitted the facility was understaffed—out of the 20 guards present, only five or six guards were inside the prison at the time of the fire.

“Chile does not have the prison system that it deserves; this problem was inherited from the past,” said the president, who appeared to be laying the blame of the decrepit state of Chilean prisons on his predecessors—the succession of social democratic and Christian Democratic regimes that followed the fall of the Pinochet dictatorship.

In fact, government officials freely admit that the prisons are overcrowded and understaffed. The nation's Supreme Court called attention to the problem a few years ago, but its recommendations were ignored.

Relatives of the dead prisoners announced on Thursday that they were going to sue the government over the death of their loved ones, some of whom were in the prison for minor offenses. One of the victims, Bastían Arriagada, was serving 20 days for selling pirated DVDs on the streets of Santiago.

The turn to so-called zero-tolerance justice (or, as it is known in Latin America, firm-handed justice [*justicia de la mano dura*]) is now a feature of imprisonment across Latin America. Even minor crimes lead to prison sentences, and the age at which one can be incarcerated in an adult institution is being constantly revised. This has contributed to the overcrowding of prisons and rising tensions within the prison population. There is no evidence that the *mano dura* policy reduces crime.

Chile's prison population of 53,000 inmates is nearly 2.5 times higher than it was a little over a decade ago (22,000). Over the last seven years, the number of prison inmates has shot up by 40 percent in Chile largely because more repressive anti-crime legislation has been passed and is being enforced. This was confirmed by Justice Minister Felipe Bulnes who indicated that possibly the repressive measure had gotten out of hand. “I feel that society is demanding

that all delinquents go to jail,” declared Bulnes.

Under *mano dura*, Chile has the highest rate of prisoners per capita on the South American continent. Along with these policies of throwing ever more people in prison for relatively minor offenses, the budget for rehabilitation has been steadily reduced. Not only has this led to increasing conflict among inmates, but also to a dramatic rise in suicides within the prison system.

According to a report that appeared on Radio Universidad de Chile, prisons are filled faster than they are constructed without regard to the conditions that exist inside them.

“Punishments are severe. Not only are prisoners deprived of liberty. They are forced to share narrow and filthy cells with four vertical rows of beds, one next to the other. There is no privacy or hygiene, no possibility of a normal life. Food is in short supply and low quality. In some prisons, like the Santiago Women’s Prison, water supply is intermittent and the state of bathrooms is disgusting. Prisoners are fighting all the time. Access to rehabilitation is a laughing matter; and there are very few jobs for the inmates,” reports UCChile, “... Inmates families are forced to subsidize the prison system by providing food, hygiene products, blankets, coats, clothing and other essential items...”

Neither Bulnes nor Piñera are suggesting that Chilean justice become less repressive. In their view, more prisons should be built.



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