

Clashes follow over 370 deaths in Honduran prison fire

Bill Van Auken
16 February 2012

Relatives of prisoners clashed with police and soldiers outside the Comayagua penitentiary in central Honduras Wednesday after a fire the previous night claimed the lives of hundreds of inmates. By late Wednesday, Honduran authorities had placed the number of dead and disappeared at 377.

The fire inflicted the most horrific death toll in many years in a country and region where mass fatalities are all too common in prison systems that are notorious for overcrowding, crumbling facilities and systematic human rights violations.

Desperation over the fate of their loved ones and anger over reports that prisoners had been left locked in their cells to die and were even fired upon as they tried to escape boiled over as men, women and children stormed the jail, breaking down its gates and hurling rocks at heavily armed riot police.

A sign over the disputed gate to the prison reads: "Let justice be done, even if the world perishes."

According to a report in the Honduran daily *La Prensa*, police had fired shots even before the confrontation in an attempt to keep the crowd from moving any closer to the fire-gutted prison.

Police were forced to rush Honduran Security Minister Pompeyo Bonilla from the scene over fears for his safety. He became a target of stone-throwing youths after lecturing the grief-stricken relatives to "be patient" and "maintain order."

More shots were fired along with tear gas as security forces fought to drive the relatives of the prisoners back from the prison yard.

The cause of the inferno that ripped through the penitentiary, located about 45 miles north of the capital, Tegucigalpa, was thought to be an inmate's mattress having caught fire from a dropped cigarette. Government officials discounted earlier reports that the

blaze was the result of a prison riot. Other reports suggested that the fire was caused by an electrical short-circuit or an inmate deliberately setting his mattress on fire.

While the blaze began about 10:50 Tuesday night, a full 40 minutes passed before firefighters were able to begin battling it. During the interim, the fire burned out of control as screaming inmates, locked in their cells, succumbed to the flames and smoke.

"There are many bodies piled up in the cell blocks who surely tried but were unable to escape the fire," Jose Garcia, a spokesman for the firefighters told the Spanish news agency EFE.

An inmate who spoke to journalist Gilda Silvestrucci of Radio Globo said that the fire had been started by a prisoner inadvertently dropping a lit cigarette onto his mattress. The guard responsible for the keys in the prisoner's cell block fled in fear, throwing the keys to the nursing station. The nurse on duty managed to open some of the cells and save the inmates inside, he said.

The inmate himself told Radio Globo that he and others had escaped by breaking through the ceiling and then jumping from the roof, some of them breaking their legs in doing so. "I still see the images and hear the screams of my friends in the facing cell," he said. He said that they were unable to escape and were pushing against the cell as they were asphyxiated by the smoke and heat.

Among the most disturbing reports came from the chief of the Comayagua Fire Department, Col. Leonel Silva, who said that that firefighters were delayed in battling the blaze out of fear for their security due to gunfire inside the prison.

The Honduran government human rights attorney, German Enamorado, said that his office was investigating the reports. "We have to confirm if there

were shots and if they were aimed at the inmates or were only for prevention,” he said.

President Porfirio Lobo called an emergency meeting of his national security council and afterward announced that the directors of the prison system would be temporarily suspended from their posts and an investigation launched to determine responsibility for the deadly fire.

The catastrophe in Comayagua, however, is only the latest in a long history of disasters suffered by those incarcerated in Honduran jails.

Just last October, nine inmates were killed during a riot inside the Sampedrano prison.

In 2004, 107 inmates were burned to death in a fire that ripped through the prison in San Pedro Sula, Honduras’s second-largest city. The blaze was attributed to an electrical short circuit, part of the dilapidated state of the facility, which is common to the entire Honduran prison system.

And in April 2003, 66 prisoners and three women visitors were killed in the El Porvenir prison near the Caribbean coastal city of La Ceiba during a massacre unleashed by fighting between rival gangs.

The 24 prisons in Honduras hold nearly 13,000 inmates, but were built for little more than 8,000. The National Penitentiary, Honduras’s largest prison, has an official capacity of 1,800 prisoners, but currently holds nearly 2,800, according to the daily *El Heraldo*. The second largest jail, in San Pedro Sula, was built for 550 and is packed with 2,100 inmates.

The conditions inside Honduras’s prisons are only one of the more extreme manifestations of the social inequality and oppression that pervades the entire country, the legacy of the protracted domination of US imperialism and a corrupt ruling elite.

According to the most recent estimates, 67.4 percent of the country’s population lives in poverty, and 42.8 percent in extreme poverty, making Honduras the second-poorest nation in the hemisphere after Haiti. What wealth there is, is monopolized by a thin layer of industrialists and landowners. The government is one of only three in the hemisphere to spend less than \$300 per capita on education and social programs.

Extreme poverty and inequality are also the essential source of the high level of violence in Honduras. Together with the legacy of dictatorial regimes and death squad violence, as well as Honduras’s location

on the route for drugs making their way to the US market, they have contributed to its having the highest murder rate in the world—82.1 per 100,000 residents, compared to the worldwide average of 6.9.

The result is a steady exodus of working people seeking to escape poverty and oppression through emigration. Some 150,000 people—roughly two percent of the population—leave each year, while the US deports some 40,000 Hondurans back to their country annually.

President Lobo, who took office a little over two years ago, has only worked to deepen the attacks on Honduran working people that were intensified in the wake of a June 2009 coup that saw the US-backed military overthrow President Manuel Zelaya and install Roberto Michelletti as president.

While making cosmetic gestures such as the creation of a human rights office and the convening of a “truth commission” that apportioned blame equally between those who staged the coup and those who were its victims, Lobo, a landowner, has faithfully defended the same social interests as Michelletti. All those who carried out assassinations and repression under the Michelletti dictatorship have enjoyed complete impunity.

The repression has continued, with over a dozen journalists, most of whom opposed the coup or wrote articles exposing government corruption, assassinated since Lobo took office. Dozens of rural workers, many of them members of peasant associations, have been killed by security forces organized by the major landholders. And police violence has continued against anti-government demonstrations.

Lobo has improved conditions for foreign capital in Honduras, while systematically imposing fiscal adjustment programs and counter-reforms that have meant a lowering of wages, destruction of the rights of teachers and other public sector workers and cuts in public spending and jobs.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact