

At least 13 dead in another Honduran prison massacre

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At least 13 prisoners died Thursday in a prison riot and fire in Honduras that has once again exposed not only the desperate conditions in the country's prison system, but also the overall assault on basic rights of the population by the country's US-backed government.

The site of the massacre was the main prison in San Pedro Sula, Honduras's northern industrial city. While authorities initially released the names of the 13 dead, whose bodies were recovered, reports spoke of as many as 20 killed.

Authorities have reported that 12 of the 13 bodies bore knife and gunshot wounds. Though a number of bodies were badly burned, they claimed that these wounds were the cause of death.

According to Honduran press accounts, the fire began in the midst of a prison riot that was sparked by an attempt to transfer a group of inmates out of their cell and into the maximum security section. The daily *El Heraldo* reported that the uprising was directed in the first instance at the so-called "sub-coordinator" of that area of the prison, Mario Antonio Henriquez Alvarez, also an inmate, who had ordered the transfer.

Pent-up anger boiled over, and one of the prisoners grabbed a machete, cutting off Henriquez Alvarez's head, which the inmates then threw onto a roof near the guard station at the prison entrance.

Prisoners who had backed Henriquez Alvarez joined in the fray, also wielding machetes, knives and other weapons. Other inmates then set fire to a cellblock and the prison bakery.

The riot was only brought to a halt after San Pedro Sula Bishop Romulo Emiliani arrived at the prison to negotiate a halt to the violence, which included a guarantee that heavily armed paramilitary police assembled outside the facility would not invade it.

"Everybody has known for some time that the authorities have no interest in the prisons," Emiliani told reporters at the scene. "They are a time bomb that will continue to explode."

The inmates themselves put out the fire that had been started and brought out the charred bodies of 13 of the dead.

Outside the prison, family members of inmates gathered, demanding to know the fate of their loved-ones.

Jesus Menjivar, a journalist from San Pedro Sula, was informed by authorities that his 21-year-old son, arrested for being in a stolen car, was among the dead. "I am destroyed," he told *La Prensa*. "My son didn't deserve this. He wasn't a criminal."

The Honduran authorities have relegated the running of the prisons and internal discipline to groups of inmates, frequently tied to influential organized crime groups on the outside. In return for bribes, they have turned a blind eye to the smuggling of weapons and drugs into the facilities.

The Honduran daily *Tiempo* quoted a caller to a local television station who identified himself as a relative of an inmate as saying that the San Pedro Sula prison was run by a criminal "mafia" that, in collaboration with the police, trafficked in arms and drugs while dispensing both punishment and privileges to other inmates. He said that Henriquez Alvarez, the first one killed in the uprising, had ordered the killing of other inmates. "There was no director there, no police in charge. He was the general coordinator who ran the place," he said.

The deaths in San Pedro Sula come barely six weeks after the horrific February 14 prison fire that killed 361 people at the Comayagua prison, about 55 miles north of the capital of Tegucigalpa.

In the wake of the Comayagua blaze, the worst single prison death toll in the country's history, relatives of inmates at the San Pedro Sula prison warned that it was headed for a similar tragedy, given even worse overcrowding and security.

Testifying Tuesday at a hearing of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, headquartered in Washington, a Honduran government representative admitted that there are 12,500 inmates in the country's 24 prisons, which were constructed to hold just 8,000.

Conditions inside the San Pedro Sula prison are among the worst, with 2,200 inmates crammed into a facility meant to house just 800.

Since 2003, a total of 556 Honduran inmates have lost their lives in fires and massacres. According to the government, 56 percent of the prison population is being held awaiting trial—in many cases for years—never having been convicted of any crime.

Amnesty International issued a statement in the wake of the latest prison tragedy: "Inmates in Honduras's prisons are being denied their basic human rights and this latest horrific incident shows how precarious their situation continues to be—despite the repeated government promises that no more such incidents will occur."

In reality, the fate of Honduran prisoners is only one of the more extreme expressions of the systematic state violence and abuse of the population by Honduras's right-wing government and its security forces.

On the same day that the prison tragedy in San Pedro Sula was reported, a farmworkers union leader denounced the shooting deaths of four more farmworkers involved in a land dispute in the Aguan River Valley in northern Honduras. This brings to nearly 50 the number of workers who have been slain by police, security forces and private gun thugs employed by oil palm plantation owners who have attempted to monopolize the land.

These killings, along with those of journalists, political oppositionists, human rights advocates and militant workers have been carried out with absolute impunity since the June 2009 military coup that toppled the elected president, Manuel Zelaya. The Obama administration, which issued perfunctory statements deploring the coup, in practice backed it and the regime that issued from it.

Nearly three years later, Washington has cemented

close ties with the right-wing government of President Porfirio Lobos, who came to power as a result of illegitimate elections held under the coup regime and boycotted by the opposition.

Vice President Joe Biden flew to Tegucigalpa on March 6 to praise Lobos for supporting the US "war on drugs." Speaking at Lobos' side, he hailed the "long and close partnership" between the US and Honduras. He discreetly avoided any details about this historic relationship, in which the United Fruit Co. imposed oppressive conditions that gave rise to the phrase "banana republic" and in which successive US administrations advised, trained and funded a military force that engaged in massacres, extra-judicial executions and torture.

The Obama administration is acting in this bloody tradition, boosting military aid to the Honduran regime while at the same time investing millions of dollars in the expansion of what is the largest US military facility in the region, the Soto Cano Air Base in Palmerola, Honduras.



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