

Twenty-four dead in Mexican prison riot

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22 December 2012

Last Tuesday, 15 prison inmates and nine guards were killed at the Center for Social Reintegration II prison in the city of Gómez Palacio (CERESO II—Gómez Palacio) in the northern state of Durango, Mexico. Six others were injured.

The killings took place in a shootout between prison guards and armed prisoners, who were aiding some of their fellow inmates to escape through a tunnel. At the time of the confrontation, the prison held 720 inmates. According to Durango State Attorney Sonia de la Garza, inmates are able to obtain weapons that they stash or bury inside the penal facility. Federal troops that were rushed to the CERESO facility were able to prevent anyone from escaping.

It is not yet clear who fired first. Durango authorities blame the inmates for firing first, saying that prison guards initially fired shots in the air to disperse the prisoners. According to the online journal *Patria Grande*, it was the guards who peppered the prisoners from the guard towers, eliciting a response from the prison inmates.

The day before, federal police had inspected the prison areas common to all the prisoners and found mobile phones, homemade weapons and other objects. As a result, 137 prisoners were transferred out of the facility.

Once in control, prison authorities transferred the inmates to other prisons in the state and announced the next day that the CERESO prison would be shut down permanently. Durango authorities have begun an investigation into the involvement of drug gangs in the escape attempt. Since 2009, over 100 inmates have been killed, supposedly while attempting to escape from the prison.

There are reports that prisoners were brutally beaten and tortured following the escape attempt. News of the armed confrontation and transfers gave way to protests outside CERESO II by family members demanding to

know the identities of the dead prisoners and the names and destinations of those prisoners that were transferred.

A report from the Madrid daily *El País* describes the area surrounding the prison as one of the most violent in México. This was the second confrontation between prisoners and guards in less than 14 months. In November 2011, 11 inmates were killed by imprisoned members of a rival criminal gang as they arrived at the prison. According to the National Commission on Human Rights (CNDH), a government agency, 352 inmates have been murdered inside Mexican prisons since 2010. Since President Peña Nieto was sworn in on December 1 there have been 57 murders in the region.

Relative to before former president Felipe Calderón launched his war on the drug cartels in 2006, escape attempts have become common in México. Since 2010, 521 prisoners have escaped in 14 attempts. The most recent escape took place on September 13 when 131 prisoners escaped from the Piedras Negras prison, in the state of Coahuila, near the US Mexico border. Sixteen Piedras Negras guards have been detained under suspicion of being involved in the escape.

Mexican prisons are notoriously violent, overcrowded and corrupt. The Gómez Palacio facility was no exception. In the summer of 2010 it was discovered that prison authorities were complicit in providing arms to prisoners associated with the Zeta cartel and in allowing them to enter and exit the prison freely to assassinate their enemies.

Mexico's 419 state and federal prisons, which according to the government ministry were originally built to house 188,000 inmates, now have a prison population of 237,000, double that of 15 years ago, largely as a consequence of the war on the drug cartels. Official statistics of an overcrowding rate of 26 percent are hard to accept, given anecdotal evidence of extreme

overcrowding in many prisons. Some Mexico City prisons are so overcrowded that prisoners sleep on the floor or hang hammocks that they made out of sheets. Prisoners are rarely provided with cots or bedding, and are forced to rely on family members. Prison-provided food is insufficient and of poor quality.

Inmates with no family support survive either through an informal network of “prison industries”—fabricating footballs, for instance, that are sold outside prison walls and for which they receive small amounts of money—or in less legal activities, such as the drug trade.

These conditions do not apply to wealthy inmates who live in relative luxury, in single cells, with air conditioning and other comforts.

Last September CNDH released a report that indicated 60 percent of Mexican jails are controlled by organized crime rings. The report was the outcome of an investigation of 100 state prisons across the country.

“No one can deny the deterioration that has take place, as shown by escapes, fights, prison self-government and attacks on prison employees,” declared CNDH President Raúl Plascencia. The report also documents the existence of prostitution rings, protection rackets, and weapons and drug sales inside the prison system.

The deterioration of Mexican prisons itself mirrors the deterioration and decay of society outside prison walls, a product of the collapse of living conditions, rising malnutrition, illiteracy, and a widening gap between the rich and the poor.

The war between the government and the criminal cartels involved in drugs, kidnappings, and human trafficking has resulted in the deaths of some 60,000 people, a conservative estimate.



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