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VENEZUELA: CHRONICLE OF A MASSACRE FORETOLD

Amnesty International today is urgently calling on the Venezuelan Government to carry out a full and impartial investigation into yesterday's massacre at La Planta prison in El Paraíso, Caracas in which up to 40 inmates were killed.

"Yet again another prison massacre has occurred which points to the appalling prison conditions and systematic violations of inmates' human rights which prevail throughout the country," Amnesty International said today.

"The government should do more than simply acknowledge the situation -- it should bring those responsible to justice and substantially improve the horrendous prison conditions to clearly show that such violations will not be tolerated nor repeated."

Members of the National Guard (armed prison guards from the Venezuelan army) shot tear gas canisters and live ammunition into the inmate's cells in the *Centro de Reeducación y Trabajo Artesanal de El Paraíso*, known as "La Planta", 6.30 am yesterday. The indiscriminate attack took the victims by surprise. A fire took hold and serious overcrowding led to the rapid spread of flames, killing dozens trapped inside their cells, although at least three died from gunshot wounds caused by firearms used by the guards.

Relatives of the deceased are being denied requested information, and many have suffered harassment from the authorities while calling for news about their loved ones.

There were around 1,800 inmates in El Paraíso, which has a maximum capacity for 500. The authorities had consistently turned a blind eye to the awful prison conditions and to the atrocities perpetrated by the wardens against the inmates.

"A serious incident was waiting to happen and the authorities failed to prevent it despite their purported commitment to human rights," Amnesty International said.

In July 1996 the Minister of Justice Enrique Meyer had publicly denounced the systematic violation of human rights which takes place in Venezuelan prisons, but failed to improve the situation.

As in most Venezuelan prisons, more than 95 per cent of El Paraíso's inmates have not been sentenced due to extreme delays in the Venezuelan administration of justice. The maximum one-year period of pre-trial detention is regularly flouted. A large proportion of those overcrowding Venezuelan prisons are in fact innocent, but will never receive any compensation for the miscarriage of justice suffered. In fact, they face a high risk of suffering serious injury or death while in detention.

For example, one of the victims of the massacre in La Planta was a minor, who according to Venezuelan law, should have never been held in an adults prison. An order for his release had been passed weeks prior to the massacre, but the authorities had failed to implement it.

The Venezuelan authorities claim that poor prison conditions are due to lack of resources -- although corruption and impunity have consistently undermined efforts to improve the situation. Amnesty International believes that the government lacks the political will to implement its national and international human rights obligations, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICPR), as applicable to prison conditions.

Since 1990 Venezuelan prisons have been the site of many massacres, including the November 1992 killing of more than 60 inmates in the Retén de Catia prison in Caracas and the January 1994 killing of more than 100 inmates in Sabaneta prison, Maracaibo. In most of these cases the prison warders have been directly involved in the killings, such as the execution of six prisoners from the Aragua State prison in January 1994. A member of the National Guard shot the six at close range in the back while they lay defenceless on the ground. The perpetrators have remained immune to prosecution, which Amnesty International believes is the root cause for continuing human rights violations in Venezuela.

Amnesty International's Secretary General, Mr. Pierre Sané, visited the country in July 1996, and presented a memorandum to President Rafael Caldera calling for swift and effective measures to improve the dramatic prison situation. The memorandum also expressed grave concern about serious human rights violations, including extra-judicial executions, torture and "disappearances" reported in the country. Mr. Sané was unable to meet the President, but the authorities, including the Ministers of Presidency, Justice and Defence, harshly mocked the organization's concerns and recommendations claiming they were "biased and unfounded".

In addition, the government has failed to implement more than 70 recommendations published in a 1993 Amnesty International report which were intended to improve Venezuela's human rights situation.

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