

EXTERNAL (for general distribution)

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Extrajudicial executions/fear of torture

11 January 1994

VENEZUELA At least 150 inmates and an unspecified number of Wayúu Indians

Amnesty International is deeply concerned that on 3 January 1994 at least 150 prisoners died and more than 250 were injured during a riot at the *Cárcel Nacional de Maracaibo*, Maracaibo National Prison, also known as *Sabaneta*, in the state of Zulia.

Reports indicate that on 3 January inmates in Sabaneta, demanding better prison conditions, staged a violent protest and set fire to some cells. Dozens died of asphyxiation and as a result of burns, but many were also reportedly killed during violence which occurred when security forces entered the prison to regain control. Scores of prisoners allegedly died as a result of gunshot wounds and stabbings. The authorities announced that the killings took place during clashes among rival prisoners' gangs, but local human rights monitors claim that the security forces were directly responsible for many of the killings, including a number of extrajudicial executions. It seems that no prison guards have been suspended pending an investigation.

Amnesty International is also greatly concerned by reports that scores of Wayúu Indian prisoners, who had allegedly participated in the riots, were transferred to *El Dorado*, a prison in an isolated jungle area near the border with Guyana.

Amnesty International visited *El Dorado* in January and November 1993 and verified its appalling conditions and reports of torture and ill-treatment.

It fears that many of the *Sabaneta* inmates transferred to *El Dorado* may be subjected to torture and ill-treatment.

In a separate incident on 5 January, at least 9 inmates were killed and dozens more wounded at the *Centro Penitenciario de Aragua*, State of Aragua Penitentiary - also known as the *Tocorón* prison, when the security forces tried to control an attempted escape and rioting by inmates. No further details are presently available about the incident at *Tocorón* prison.

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The *Sabaneta* prison, which has a capacity of 900, was holding nearly 3000 inmates at the time of riot. It is well-known for its appalling conditions, such as severe overcrowding, lack of drinking water and sanitation, inadequate medical care and food and frequent beatings of prisoners by prison guards. In 1993, violent clashes among prisoners in *Sabaneta* resulted in the death of at least 70 inmates. During a recent visit to Venezuela, an Amnesty International delegation was denied access to the prison.

In Venezuela dozens of prisoners have been the victims of arbitrary killings and extrajudicial executions by members of the security forces. Most of those responsible have not been brought to justice, such as in the case of the November 1992 massacre of more than 63 prisoners in the *Retén de Catia* in Caracas (see

UA 377/92, AMR 53/09/92, 30 November 1992).

Amnesty International is calling for a full and effective investigation into the killings at the *Sabaneta* and *Tocorón* prisons, and for those responsible to be brought to justice. Investigations should include the effective identification of the victims. Amnesty International is deeply concerned about reports that, while hundreds of relatives of prisoners in *Sabaneta* were still waiting for information about their loved ones, the authorities - alleging lack of refrigerated storage facilities - began to bury dozens of bodies in common graves in a cemetery in Maracaibo.

Amnesty International is also gravely concerned that unless urgent and effective measures are adopted to improve prison conditions and the administration of justice, incidents like those in *Sabaneta* may be repeated in prisons throughout the country.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express and airmail letters either in Spanish or in your own language:**

- expressing grave concern about the deaths of at least 150 people in the *Sabaneta* prison on 3 January 1994 and of at least 9 at the *Tocorón* prison on 5 January 1994;
- requesting the authorities to carry out immediate, full and impartial investigations into each of these incidents, following the guidelines of the United Nations' Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions;
- urging the full identification of the victims and adequate care of all the wounded;
- urging that all necessary steps are taken to ensure that the security forces abide by the United Nations' Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials;
- requesting that the safety of the Wayúu Indians transferred to *El Dorado* prison be safeguarded against any possible torture or ill-treatment.

**APPEALS TO**

1) President of the Republic

Sr. Ramón José Velásquez

President of the Republic of Venezuela

Palacio de Miraflores, Caracas, Venezuela

**Telegrams: President Velásquez, Caracas, Venezuela**

**Telexes: 26429 EXTER VC**

**Salutation: Sr. Presidente / Mr. President**

2) Minister of Defence

Vice Almirante Radamés Muñoz León

Ministro de Defensa Nacional

Ministerio de Defensa Nacional

Fuerte Tiuna, Conejo Blanco,

El Valle, Caracas, Venezuela

**Telegrams: Ministro Defensa, Caracas, Venezuela**

**Faxes: +58 2 66 28 829**

**Salutation: Sr. Ministro / Dear Minister**

3) Attorney General of the Republic

Dr. Ramón Escovar Salom

Fiscal General de la República

Fiscalía General de la República

Manduca a Ferrenquín

La Candelaria, Caracas 1010-A, VENEZUELA

**Telegrams: Fiscal General, Caracas, Venezuela**

**Faxes: + 58 2 66 28 829**

**Salutation: Estimado Dr. Escovar Salom / Dear Dr. Escovar Salom**

**COPIES OF YOUR APPEALS TO:**

1). Human Rights organization

Sres., PROVEA, Apartado 5156, Caracas 1010-A, VENEZUELA

2). Daily Newspaper

El Nacional, Edificio El Nacional, Puente Nuevo a Puerto Escondido, Caracas, VENEZUELA

and to diplomatic representatives of Venezuela accredited to your country

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 22 February 1994.