

EXTERNAL

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Possible extrajudicial executions /
Fear for safety / Medical concern

24 October 1996

VENEZUELA At least 27 inmates, including one minor

At least 27 inmates in La Planta prison in the Paraíso neighbourhood of Caracas are reported to have died as a result of an attack by members of the National Guard on 22 October 1996. Tension in the prison, notorious for its appalling conditions, remains high in the aftermath of the killings, and Amnesty International is deeply concerned for the safety of those wounded in the attack and other inmates.

According to information received by Amnesty International, the inmates were killed after members of the National Guard (armed prison guards who belong to the Venezuelan army), shot tear gas canisters and live ammunition into their cells in the *Centro de Reeducación y Trabajo Artesanal de El Paraíso*, as known as "La Planta" prison. The indiscriminate and reportedly unprovoked attack, which took place at 6.30am, took the prisoners by surprise. A fire started, which due to the appalling prison conditions and serious overcrowding, spread rapidly, killing many prisoners locked in their cells, at a time when these should have been open. At least three inmates reportedly died from gunshot wounds caused by firearms used by the guards.

At least 24 inmates have been wounded, many with second or third degree burns. Some have been taken to local hospitals, but Amnesty International remains concerned that some of the wounded, who remain in the prison, may not be receiving adequate treatment for their injuries. The organization also fears that inmates may be at increased risk of ill-treatment in the current heightened tension in the prison.

Relatives of the deceased are being denied information, and many have suffered harassment from the authorities while calling for news about their loved ones. The exact number of dead, possibly as many as 40 inmates, remains unclear due to poor documentation and difficulty in identifying the bodies incinerated by the flames.

At least one of the victims of the massacre in La Planta prison was a minor, who according to Venezuelan law should never have been detained in an adult's prison. An order for his release was passed a few weeks prior to 22 October, but the authorities had failed to implement it.

Amnesty International is also seriously concerned by latest reports indicating that the investigation into the killings in La Planta prison will be carried out by the military courts, which have consistently failed to bring perpetrators of human rights violations to justice.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There were around 1800 inmates in La Planta prison, which has a maximum capacity for 500. Despite their stated commitment to human rights, the authorities have consistently failed to deal with the appalling prison conditions in La Planta, and the human rights violations carried out there by warders against inmates.

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

Since 1990 Venezuelan prisons have seen the worst massacres in the region, including the November 1992 killing of more than 60 inmates in the Retén de Catia, a 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 extrajudicial execution by the National Guard of six prisoners from the Aragua State prison, in January 1994. The perpetrators have remained unpunished. Amnesty International believes that such impunity is the root cause for continuing human rights violations in Venezuela.

Amnesty International Secretary General, Pierre Sané, visited the country in July 1996, and handed a memorandum to President Rafael Caldera calling for swift and effective measures to improve the prison situation. The memorandum also expressed grave concern about serious human rights violations in Venezuela, including extrajudicial executions, torture and "disappearances". Officials of the Venezuelan government, including the Ministers of Presidency, Justice and Defence, harshly mocked Amnesty International's findings, concerns and recommendations, claiming they were "biased and unfounded".

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

- expressing grave concern at the death of at least 27 people in "La Planta" prison in Caracas on 22 October 1996 after an attack by members of the National Guard;

- urging the full identification of the victims, adequate medical care for all the wounded and immediate measures to ensure the safety of other inmates;
- requesting that the authorities carry out immediate, full and impartial investigations by civilian courts into the killings, following the guidelines of the United Nation's Principles on the Effective Prevention and Investigation of Extra-legal, Arbitrary and Summary Executions;

- requesting that the results of the investigations are made public and that those responsible for the Paraíso killings are brought to justice;

where possible, also:

- request that the victims and their relatives are awarded full compensation;
- note that the killings constitute another incident in Venezuela's history of prison killings and calling for the swift adoption and implementation of effective measures to improve the prison service, in line with the UN Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment.

APPEALS TO:

1) Minister of Presidency

Doctor Asdrúbal Aguiar
Secretaría de la Presidencia
Palacio de Miraflores
Caracas, Venezuela

Faxes: +58 2 861 0793

Telegrams: Secretaria de la Presidencia, Caracas, Venezuela

Salutation: Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister

2) Minister of Justice

Doctor Enrique Meier
Ministro de Justicia
Ministerio de Justicia
Torre Norte, piso 25

Centro Simón Bolívar
Caracas, Venezuela
Telexes: 21935 MINJU VC
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Telegrams: Ministro de Justicia, Caracas, Venezuela
Salutation: Sr. Ministro/Dear Minister

3) Minister of Defence

General Pedro Nicolas Valencia Vivas
Ministro de Defensa
Ministerio de Defensa Nacional
Fuerte Tiuna, Conejo Blanco
El Valle, Caracas, Venezuela
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Salutation: Sr. Ministro de Defensa / Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

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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 17 December 1996.