
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICE 03/94

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NEWS SERVICE ITEMS: EXTERNAL - VENEZUELA, MEXICO

NEWS INITIATIVES - INTERNAL

INTERNATIONAL NEWS RELEASES

Tunisia - 12 January

UN Peacekeeping operations - 4 February - SEE NEWS SERVICE 170

UK - 9 February - SEE NEWS SERVICE 170

****South Africa - 16 February** THIS DATE IS LIKELY TO BE POSTPONED. WE WILL KEEP YOU INFORMED OF A NEW DATE WHEN IT IS SET.**

Kuwait - 24 February - SEE NEWS SERVICE 170

TARGETED AND LIMITED NEWS RELEASES

USA death penalty - 14 January - **PLEASE NOTE** The text of this news release was sent out to you today and contains a mistake. In the penultimate paragraph, beginning: "Only misplaced political will...", we say that 35 people were executed last year. In fact, 38 people were executed in 1993. Many thanks to Riccardo of the Italian Section for spotting this and letting us know!

Despite the fact that President Clinton will be out of the USA next week, the embargo date of the Open Letter and news release on the death penalty will not be changed. They are confirmed at 0001 hrs gmt Friday 14 January.

Zaire - 2 February - SEE NEWS SERVICE 170

FORTHCOMING NEWS INITIATIVES

Women - 8 March - SEE NEWS SERVICE 161

Saudi Arabia - 10 March more details to follow

Colombia - 16 March - SEE NEWS SERVICE 123 + UAs AMR 23/56-57/93

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10 January 1994

VENEZUELA: OVER 150 KILLED IN PRISON RIOTS

At least 150 prisoners died and more than 250 were injured on 3 January during a riot in the Cárcel Nacional de Maracaibo, (Maracaibo National Prison), also known as Sabaneta, in the Venezuelan state of Zulia. In a separate incident on 5 January, at least nine inmates were killed and dozens of others wounded at the Centro Penitenciario de Aragua, (Aragua State Penitentiary), known as the Tococon prison, when security forces tried to control a riot and attempted escape by inmates. Amnesty International is calling for a full and impartial investigation into the reported killings including identification and proper autopsies of the victims' bodies.

According to reports, a protest in favour of better prison conditions was staged by inmates of Sabaneta on the afternoon of 3 January 1994. Prison cells were set alight and dozens died as a result of burns and asphyxiation. Security forces entered the prison to try and regain control and reports state that violent clashes with inmates ensued. Scores of prisoners died from gunshot wounds and stabbings. The authorities have alleged that the killings took place during fights between rival prison gangs, but local human rights monitors fear the security forces may have been directly responsible for many of the killings, including possible extra-judicial executions.

Amnesty International is appalled by reports that the authorities - alleging lack of refrigerated storage facilities - began to bury dozens of victims' bodies in common graves in a Maracaibo cemetery, while hundreds of relatives were still waiting for information about the fate of their loved ones. Venezuelan human rights organizations have called for the authorities to install emergency refrigerating units for the adequate preservation of bodies pending identification and proper autopsies.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about reports that, after the incident, scores of prisoners from Sabaneta belonging to the Wayúu (Guajiro) Indian community, who allegedly participated in the riots, were transferred to El Dorado prison, located hundreds of miles away, in the isolated jungle-area located near the border with Guyana. Reports of brutality against inmates held in this prison are frequent. For example, on 6 November 1993 a prisoner was tortured and killed by the guards. He had completed his sentence in September 1993. Amnesty International fears that many of those transferred to El Dorado might suffer torture and other ill-treatment.

An Amnesty International delegation visited Venezuela before the country's presidential elections in December 1993 and although it was granted admission to several penal institutions it was denied access to Sabaneta prison. The human rights organization's recent report **Venezuela: The eclipse of human rights** details its serious concerns about prison conditions in the country and this was one of the topics under discussion when the delegation met government officials and representatives of the main political parties running in the elections, including Rafael Caldera's winning Convergencia Nacional.

Although all those present at the talks echoed Amnesty International's concerns, the organization fears that unless urgent and effective measures are swiftly adopted, incidents like that in Sabaneta may be repeated in other prisons throughout the country.

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MEXICO: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONCERNED BY POSSIBILITY OF WIDESPREAD HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS FOLLOWING PEASANT AND INDIAN UPRISING

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about the possibility of widespread human rights violations by the Mexican security forces following a rebel uprising in the southern state of Chiapas by the armed opposition group Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista National Liberation Army).

Amnesty International is calling on the Mexican Government to ensure thorough investigation of human rights violations in Chiapas and elsewhere, which may have taken place in the context of the conflict and that those responsible be brought to justice. The organization is following the situation very closely and will shortly be sending a delegation to Chiapas.

In a surprise action on 1 January the previously unknown group, most of whose members seem to belong to local Tzotzil Indian communities, took control of several towns including the state's second largest town, San Cristóbal de las Casas, and declared war on the Mexican army. They are calling for the full recognition of the land and rights of the indigenous population in that and other impoverished regions of Mexico.

The guerrillas swiftly abandoned most of the towns they had occupied except Ocosingo, where heavy fighting ensued on 2 and 3 January as units of the Mexican Army attempted to regain control. By the end of the week most of the guerrillas had reportedly retreated towards dense and mostly uninhabited jungle areas. Heavy fighting was also reported in some rural areas of Chiapas throughout the week, and units of the Mexican air force and army have continued to carry out attacks against peasant villages. On 5 and 6 January Indian communities outside San Cristóbal de las Casas were bombed from the air.

The rebels, who are holding several prisoners including Absalón Castellanos, a former governor of Chiapas, have rejected calls from the Mexican Government to surrender their arms. The government has vowed to respect human rights in the military operation and has sent the director of the governmental National Human Rights Commission to Chiapas to monitor the situation.

The official number of fatalities is currently 103, including 61 rebels, scores of civilians and several soldiers and police, although local human rights monitors claim that over 400 have died and dozens more wounded.

Amnesty International is deeply concerned about reports of human rights violations, including the possible extrajudicial execution of at least five rebels by members of the Mexican army in the town of Ocosingo on 4 January. There have also been reports of the possible "disappearance" of some members of Indian communities attacked by the army; the possible torture of rebels and civilians arrested by the Mexican security forces and attacks and bombings of some towns and communities inhabited by indigenous peasants. Amnesty International is also concerned about alleged threats against local human rights monitors and members of the Catholic Church. The organization is making an urgent appeal to the Mexican Government to prevent further human rights violations, and to adopt effective measures to protect local human rights monitors.

Amnesty International has for many years documented a pattern of gross human rights violations against members of the indigenous and peasant communities, often related to land-tenure conflicts in Chiapas and other regions in Mexico, carried out by the security forces. A large number of the victims of such abuses belong to the poorest sectors of the population. The violations have included

massive and arbitrary arrests, torture and ill-treatment of community members and sporadic cases of political killings. Those responsible have perpetrated the violations with impunity.

Amnesty International also condemns the ill-treatment, torture and execution of prisoners and the taking of hostages by armed opposition groups such as the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional. The organization calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages held by that group.

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