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Fear for safety

22 December 1994

VENEZUELA Fear for safety of prisoners as National Guard deployed in seven prisons

The Venezuelan authorities have announced that they are sending military personnel into seven prisons throughout the country following violent incidents in several detention centres in the past few weeks. Amnesty International is calling for those deployed to abide by the United Nations' Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials, in order to avoid the repetition of recent past human rights violations in the context of prison unrest.

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 (see UA 04/94, AMR 53/01/94, 11 January 1994). Dozens died of asphyxiation and as a result of burns after they set fire to their cells, but many were also reported to have been unlawfully killed by the National Guard when they entered the prison to regain control.

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. Reports since indicate that six prisoners were extrajudicially executed by members of the National Guard on the same day.

According to the human rights organization Provea, the situation in the Venezuelan prison system has reached crisis levels where riots take place almost on a daily basis. It is in this context that the government have said that the National Guard will be deployed from now until at least 31 January 1995 to restore order.

Prison conditions in Venezuela continue to be extremely harsh, frequently amounting to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Most prisons are severely overcrowded and lack essential sanitary facilities such as running water, electricity and sewage. They also have inadequate food, medical care and rehabilitation and recreational facilities. In addition, Amnesty International continues to receive reports of the torture and ill-treatment of prisoners.

On 20 December 1994, 41 prisoners at the *Centro Penitenciario de Valencia*, also known as the *Tocuyito* prison, in the state of Aragua, were reported to have inflicted wounds on themselves with homemade knives and razor blades, in protest against the appalling conditions in which they were being held. Seven prisoners are reported to be in a serious condition in hospital.

Although the Ministry of Justice has repeatedly announced plans to reform the Venezuelan prison system, and to substantially reduce the overcrowding of prisons, Amnesty International remains seriously concerned about continuing abuses suffered by hundreds of inmates held in these overcrowded prisons and detention centres.

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

- calling on the authorities to ensure that the security forces currently being deployed in prisons abide by the United Nations' Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials;

- calling on the authorities to carry out their planned reform of the prison system as a matter of urgency, emphasizing that Amnesty International considers the conditions in many prisons to amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

APPEALS TO

1) President of the Republic

Sr. Rafael Caldera
 Presidente de la República
 de Venezuela
 Palacio de Miraflores
 Caracas, VENEZUELA

Telegrams: Presidente Velásquez, Caracas, Venezuela

Telexes: 21161 MIRAF VC

Faxes: (+58 2) 838239

Salutation: Sr. Presidente / Mr. President

2) Minister of Justice

Doctor Rubén Creixems Savignon
 Ministro de Justicia
 Ministerio de Justicia
 Torre Norte, piso 25
 Centro Simón Bolívar
 Caracas, VENEZUELA

Telegrams: Ministro Justicia, Caracas, Venezuela

Telexes: 21935 MINJU VC

Faxes: (+58 2) 482 0994 (if voice answers ask: me da tono por favor)

Salutation: Sr. Ministro / Dear Minister

COPIES OF YOUR APPEALS TO:

1) Human rights organization

Sres. CODDECIUC
 Boulevard del Teatro Municipal
 entre C/ Colombia y Libertad
 Valencia, Estado Carabobo
 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 6 February 1995.