

AI Index: PRE 01/312/2011
22 June 2011

Deadly clashes highlight need for urgent prison reform in Venezuela

The Venezuelan government must not commit human rights abuses in quelling violent prison riots, Amnesty International said today, after 19 prisoners died in clashes between armed inmates and National Guard troops.

The authorities have a duty to maintain control of its prisons and ensure prisoners are not put at risk.

Groups of armed prisoners at El Rodeo II prison in Guatire, 40 km from the capital Caracas, have been engaged in a stand-off with security forces for several days. Members of the National Guard went into the prison on 17 June to disarm prisoners following clashes that broke out between rival gangs on 12 June at the adjacent El Rodeo I prison.

“Yet another explosion of violence in a Venezuelan prison points to the appalling prison conditions that have persisted in the country for many years and the failure of the authorities to adequately address the situation,” said Guadalupe Marengo, Deputy Director of Amnesty International’s Americas Division.

“The Venezuelan authorities must promptly launch an independent investigation into what went wrong at El Rodeo, establishing responsibility for the high level of weapons in the prison, and ensure that similar incidents are not repeated in the future,” said Guadalupe Marengo.

The National Guard regained control of El Rodeo I prison on 17 June in an operation involving 4,000 troops, but it has not fully regained control of El Rodeo II.

Although a list of prisoners who have been transferred to other prisons has recently been issued, the fate of some of the prisoners in El Rodeo remains unknown.

Amnesty International called on Venezuela to urgently reform its prison system to solve the country’s prison crisis, which sees many inmates in deplorable conditions and has led to numerous deaths.

While the Venezuelan authorities acknowledge the serious situation faced by its prisons, it has consistently failed to take the measures urgently required to improve the country’s terrible prison conditions.

Chronic overcrowding, extreme delays in the administration of justice, the lack of access to proper medical care and the lack of an independent prison inspection system are all obstacles that need to be overcome.

Amnesty International urged the Venezuelan authorities to clamp down on endemic corruption that leads to human rights abuses in prisons, as well as giving prison guards the necessary resources and training to carry out their job.

“In Venezuela, prisoners are often held in cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions and violence is endemic,” said Guadalupe Marengo.

“The recently created prison ministry and presidential commission on the control of arms, ammunition and disarmament must carry out the necessary reforms to prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future”.