

5-20-2004

Honduran Youths Burned to Death

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Honduran Youths Burned to Death." (2004). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9200>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Honduran Youths Burned to Death

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Honduran

Published: 2004-05-20

Honduras' war on gangs took a coincidence-stretching turn early Monday morning, May 17, when, for the second time in a year, scores of gang members were burned to death in a prison fire. A year ago, a fire and bullets at El Porvenir prison killed 70 gang members. Monday's, at San Pedro Sula, killed 103. Both fires burned only cellblocks housing gang members.

In the latest blaze, most of those killed were members of Mara Salvatrucha. "Many of the guys who died in there were in jail just because they had tattoos," said 18-year-old Olmon Alberto Contreras from his hospital bed, where he lay with severe burns. He is one of a reported 27 hospitalized with second- and third-degree burns, some of whom are expected to be added shortly to the death toll. Contreras said he was arrested in the Asentamiento Humano colonia of San Pedro Sula, where police routinely arrest anyone with gang tattoos and charge them with "challenging authority."

From the bed next to Contreras, Santos Arnulfo Pena, 29, told an AP reporter, "If the police need to fill a quota, they go out and arrest anyone with tattoos. This is part of a plan by [President] Ricardo Maduro to exterminate us (see NotiCen, 2003-09-11)." Stories conflict on how the fire started the government blames faulty wiring but there is no question about how those who were to die came to have been crowded into the cellblock that was to become their crematorium in the first place.

In August, President Maduro passed legislation outlawing gangs and setting 12-year minimum sentences just for being a member. Firefighters and authorities disagreed on which of the 75 electrical devices, air conditioners, fans, or refrigerators short-circuited and ignited bedding and curtains in the jammed 10 by 15-meter cellblock, but Vice President Vicente Williams denied it was intentionally set. Investigators determined on a preliminary basis that all 103 inmates burned to death or died from asphyxia; none was shot. Guards reportedly shot at the prisoners as they screamed for help and tore at the bars but did not open the doors until an hour had passed.

Fix the problem with international money

Belatedly calling the penitentiary system a "time bomb," Williams said the government was organizing a special commission to improve prison conditions. In a statement at odds with the 12-year mandatory-sentencing provision of the gang law, he told reporters, "What we are proposing is rehabilitation for prisoners to reintroduce them to society. We are looking for international financing to repair and improve prisons."

Vice Minister of Security Armando Calidonio had previously informed reporters of a study done by municipal firefighters that had determined the electrical system at the prison was substandard, but no repairs were made for lack of funds. Security measures taken after the fire included sending in the Army and SWAT teams to prevent escape of anyone still ambulatory, lockdown of prisoners in other cellblocks, and exclusion of visitors come to inquire after individual prisoners. The excluded

visitors included prisoners' mothers, who appealed to the church, in the person of Romulo Emiliani, auxiliary bishop of San Pedro Sula, for confirmation of the status of their sons. Fingerprints were taken of corpses to identify them.

Of the 180 or so gang-affiliated prisoners, about 54 were unhurt. These were later to be transferred to another prison, Penitenciaría Francisco Morazón de Tamara, but not before they were able to tell of their experience. "They wanted to leave us to die," they all said. Their version was corroborated by firefighters who found the doors to their block still locked when they arrived more than an hour after the fire started.

The survivors said their screams for help were answered with bullets, forcing them to retreat back into the smoke and flames. Of the dead, most died from the smoke. Some survivors climbed the walls to continue shouting for help from between the bars. Police denied having heard them.

Meanwhile, Vice President Williams went about the familiar business of post-disaster fundraising. On May 18 he said, "Today we will have a meeting with the entire diplomatic corps accredited in Honduras and with organizations of international cooperation to solicit emergency aid to modernize, as quickly as possible, the penal infrastructure." The figure floated by the government to modernize all the country's prisons is just over US\$26 million.

Despite the enthusiasm with which the government began throwing these young people in jail last year (see NotiCen, 2003-08-28, 2004-02-05), Williams admitted that there has been no improvement to the prisons and that "unfortunately, there has been no rehabilitation policy."

One survivor, Jose Anselmo Hernandez, said he was first to call for help, about 15 minutes after the fire started. When his cries were unheeded, he and others, still shouting, retreated to the bathrooms. "We asked them to open up because we were burning and, instead of quickly opening the cell, what they did was to shoot at us."

Many of the survivors saved their lives by turning on an exhaust fan. When they attempted to break the locks using exercise weights, they heard the police shooting at them. Let this garbage die Hernandez said they kept on hitting the door with the weights, preferring to die by bullets than burn. They could hear a guard say, "Let this garbage die." By the time help arrived, many had. "If they had responded in time, only three or five would have died," said the prisoner. When the fire was extinguished, the prisoners had to bring out the bodies of their companions.

Firefighters said that empty water tanks also contributed to the death toll. Prisoners thought this particularly suspicious, since the water comes on every night at seven, filling the tanks until four in the morning, but Sunday night, the water never came. Despite evidence to the contrary, prison director Elias Canaca denied they had waited hours to help the inmates. "The door was opened for them quickly," he said. "What happened is that there are more than 1,800 prisoners in the general premises, and at first I thought it was an escape, but after, we noticed that it was a fire." He said that when they figured out that the fire was in the gang members' cellblock, "we opened the doors for them."

The gunshots, he claimed, were not aimed at prisoners, but were fired for the purpose of giving an alarm. "It's the way of sounding an alarm when there is a fire or riot, since we don't have means of communication," he said by way of explanation.

Canaca has been suspended. Regional forensic medical director Francisco Herrera said, "As a preliminary, I can affirm that those we have analyzed till now have no evidence of knife or gunshot wounds, but only of smoke intoxication." The difficulties for the survivors may not be over yet. They are all members of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS). The prison that will be their new home, Tamara, is already home to rival M-18. They were thoroughly searched before boarding the bus and fear that, arriving unarmed, they will be subject to confrontation and possible harm.

MS was organized in Honduras in 1997 by young men who had been deported from Los Angeles, California. Salvatrucha is a corruption of Salvadorena. Young Hondurans had joined the 18th street gang in LA in the 1980s and were against Salvadoran immigrants to their community. Salvatrucha organized to defend against them, but later incorporated Honduran members. When the Hondurans who were part of the 18th street gang were deported, they formed M-18 in Honduras. There is no reason to think they will get on well in Tamara.

President Maduro and his wife were in Spain when the fire broke out, set to attend a royal wedding. But they abandoned their plans to rush home "as soon as possible," said first lady Aguas Ocana, "to be with the families of the victims."

-- End --