

5-8-2008

Wholesale Murder In Honduran Prisons Continues As Nine Are Slaughtered in San Pedro Sula and 18 Die At Tamara

LADB Staff

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

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Wholesale Murder In Honduran Prisons Continues As Nine Are Slaughtered in San Pedro Sula and 18 Die At Tamara." (2008). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9606>

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.

Wholesale Murder In Honduran Prisons Continues As Nine Are Slaughtered in San Pedro Sula and 18 Die At Tamara

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Honduras

Published: 2008-05-08

During the last seven years, more than 450 people have died in the grotesque, inhuman hell that is the Honduran prison system. Some hacked to death with machetes, some burned alive, some few mercifully shot. Their numbers rose by nine on April 26 in a riot in the prison at San Pedro Sula. Then, again, in this penal system stuffed to bursting by draconian law and an economy that cannot feed its own, on May 3 another 18 died at a prison outside the capital city Tegucigalpa. The nine-victim April incident occurred at the San Pedro Sula prison already famed as the scene of Honduras' greatest prison massacre, that of 2004, when more than 100 prisoners, mostly gang members, burned to death in a fire (see NotiCen, 2004-05-20).

The recent and more modest episode was the result of a confrontation between ex-gang members, or "pesetas" as they are known within the walls, and unaffiliated criminals, or "paisas." San Pedro Sula police chief Abraham Figueroa said a fight started in the corridors of the institution when paisa leader Rigoberto Contreras, known also as El Chele Volqueta, attacked a peseta, Johnny Jimenez, whereupon Jimenez shot El Chele to death. The ex-gang members immediately sought to punish the followers of Contreras. Figueroa noted that the different classes of prisoners tend to stay among their respective reference groups and that this is true also of current gang members, or "mareros." The pesetas are a problematic group because they are ex-gang members in the sense that they are being "rehabilitated." As such, the implication is that they draw the contempt of other groups.

Accounts vary as to the details of the attack and counterattack, but at the end of hostilities, eight paisas and one peseta were dead. All died of knife or machete wounds, although one gun was recovered from the subdued participants. Without divulging where weapons within the prison come from, how they are brought in, or how prisoners manage to keep them at the ready, officials acknowledged prisoners have all kinds of contraband, from cell phones to grenades. The authorities said this is the case despite their continual inspections and searches.

A fatal move with the best intentions

The stage was set for things to start going really wrong when, as a result of this clash, authorities decided to transfer prisoners involved in the melee, 31 of them, to another institution. Prosecutor Ismael Mendoza said the measure would avert further attacks in the 3,000-inmate institution built to house 800. The transferees were moved a week later to the Penitenciaria Nacional (PN), about 20 km north of Tegucigalpa in Tamara. Minister of Security Jorge Rodas said of what happened next, "The transfer was made with the sane intention of stopping these slaughters that keep happening, these massacres in San Pedro Sula." Sane the intention may have been, but Rodas' explanation ignores that this institution was, on Jan 6, 2006, the scene of a shootout between rival gangs that left 13 dead and 30 wounded (see NotiCen, 2006-01-12). On May 3, the day after the transferees arrived, the

prisoners already resident in the overcrowded PN attacked the new arrivals with knives and guns. The San Pedranos fought back, but only 13 survived.

A disappointed Rodas told the media, "We have to find the way to build penitentiaries that fulfill the security requirements, to have true separation, and avoid problems of this kind." The death of the 18 forced a kind of admission that authorities really do not know what to do or how to do it. Rodas said the transfer was "most appropriate to save their lives, but unfortunately they ran a risk in whatever prison because of the makeup of the group." Rodas argued that, once marked for death, no group has a chance anywhere in the system because the conditions to guarantee their lives do not exist. "The transfer of these people here was through the good intentions of the San Pedro Sula authorities, the human rights [authorities], the judicial branch." But, he admitted, there was no safe place for them because, the system's "capacities are surpassed."

Advance warnings; it was inevitable

The excuse carried no weight with family members of the prisoners, some of whom had been warned in advance that, if the prisoners went to the PN at Tamara, they would be killed. Reporters asked Rodas about this. He replied, "Investigations were done here, and there were no indications that they were waiting to kill them. Unfortunately these operations were planned in one minute, and apparently this is what happened." He said that, during the week before their arrival, there had been a thorough shakedown that netted arms and explosives. The "good intentions" argument also lends itself to the interpretation that San Pedro authorities had a good idea that a massacre was inevitable and just did not want it happening on their turf.

Security Ministry spokesman Hector Ivan Mejia Vasquez emphasized the influence of cellblock coordinators who told officials there was no resistance at the PN to relocating the prisoners. He would not go into detail about what the coordinators said or how they could have been so out of touch with their environment. He said there was information about the coordinators but he could not reveal it because the matter was still under investigation. He said the coordinators were committed to ending violence, but the events demonstrated they had broken their commitments.

The 13 survivors, meanwhile, see their chances of continued survival diminishing, and they have pleaded for some kind of extra protection or isolation. They are alive only by the luck of the draw. Upon arrival at the PN, five of the group of 31 were assigned to sector Procesados 1; seven went to Procesados 2; six went to Sentenciados 2. They all died. The 13 survivors were assigned to the Casa Blanca area, where they were not attacked. Reports said those killed were taken during the night, between 1 a.m. and 2 a.m., to a third location, where they were killed.

Their bodies were then thrown into a pile and the killing floors were washed clean of evidence. By the time authorities arrived on the scene, they could only surmise the victims had been killed in three separate locations and later stacked at a single location. They were not found until between 5 a.m. and 6 a.m. First on the scene were guards making routine rounds. There had been no riot. Not until long after it was all over did the Cobras, the elite special-operations police, arrive with automatic weapons and other dramatic paraphernalia. After the Cobras came the agents of the Direccion General de Investigacion General (DGIC). When the officials figured out who the victims

were, they ordered the 13 at Casa Blanca to be put under heavy guard. At that point the 13 began to beg that they be transferred to a third location, far from San Pedro Sula and the PN.

One survivor, Horacio Gomez Castellanos, implored, "We beg that we be given protection, that they transfer us to another prison where none of this can happen because if they don't transfer us, they will kill us." By rights, Gomez should not even have been in prison, he told reporters. "I'm here for illicit association," he said, "and I have already served my sentence. I'm supposed to be free, and I don't know why they transferred me, but I ask for my transfer because I'm at risk because I belonged to [Mara] 18, but I retired five years ago." Gomez Castellanos appealed to the media to make an issue of getting him and the others out of the PN before anything else happens. "There in San Pedro Sula they killed nine, and here they killed 18. We can't survive like this, we can't keep being at risk just for one person, because this is all happening just for one person." He meant El Chele Volqueta. Both massacres, he said, were revenge from the Paisas.

Other survivors joined Gomez in beseeching reporters to help get them sent elsewhere. They, like Rodas and the rest of Honduran officialdom, did not know where, but, as survivor Ever Alexander Escalante put it, "Anyplace but here, because here life is worth nothing, and I don't want to go back to San Pedro Sula either." A couple of days later, President Manuel (Mel) Zelaya expressed dissatisfaction with official explanations. He said the transfer of prisoners had been made "without preparing the necessary conditions," and "both the director of Centros Penitenciarios and the director of the penitentiary at Tamara [the PN] must explain why this tragedy happened, why this tragedy could not have been prevented." Zelaya, who has previously admitted that violence in his country is completely out of his control (see NotiCen, 2008-03-13), promised some systemic changes in the near future to deal with the prison problems.

-- End --