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By midafternoon on May 11, the maximum-security section in the Centro Penitenciario La Reforma, Costa Rica's major jail facility, was about to become the starting point of a bloody prison-break attempt, which was eventually foiled after sundown.

Havoc began being wreaked when nine top-security inmates came out from their individual cells, quickly taking several hostages from among 16 administration employees and security officers.

Fuerza Pública (FP), Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ), and Dirección de Inteligencia y Seguridad Nacional (DIS) officers and agents were rushed to the scene of the mutiny. Negotiations began between OIJ experts and leaders of the uprising, continuing for hours, until leaders of the escape plot decided to take their next—and fatal—step.

Under the cover of blankets—so the prison guards and other security officers rapidly deployed inside the prison compound could not tell prisoners from hostages—the group of 25 began moving toward the penitentiary’s armory. The security forces moved to surround the moving tunnel, and, at one point, smoke and tear-gas canisters were fired at the group, causing the blankets to fall and the prisoners’ human shield to disband.

A shootout ensued between inmates and security officers, claiming the lives of two prisoners and one guard.

Early results of an investigation of the shootout revealed, more than a month later, that the guard had been hit by a bullet fired from an OIJ or a DIS weapon.

The uprising was eventually quelled, and inmates were returned to their maximum-security cells. It was then that fallout from the incident began to occur.

An inquiry was immediately launched by the Ministerio de Justicia—responsible for this nation’s prison system—and the OIJ, aimed at answering questions such as how leaders of the uprising obtained the keys with which they unlocked cells and how they got the cell phones and weapons they surrendered to authorities once the incident ended.

Guards under suspicion in problem-plagued prisons

The day after the incident, OIJ chief Jorge Rojas told a press conference that several La Reforma security officers were under "wide investigation" as suspects in supporting the crushed prison break. Suspicion stems from the fact that mutiny leaders had keys to the cells, guns, and cell phones, explained Rojas.

In separate statements to journalists, Justice Minister Hernando París said that, regarding prisons, "Costa Rica has three serious problems." One, "overcrowding...is not simply whether the inmate is comfortable but implies pressure on jail infrastructure, which makes management more difficult,"
París explained. The second problem is "the need for more penitentiary police, and third, [there’s need for] a maximum-security prison."

Immediately after the violent events at La Reforma, some 15 km northwest of San José, Costa Rica’s capital, the media, opposition members of the unicameral Asamblea Legislativa (AL), analysts, and the Defensoría de los Habitantes began to point to what was—and still is—described in general as major flaws in prison security, including corruption of security personnel.

In its June 11 editorial—one month after the incident—the popular local daily asserted that prison guards involved in the escape attempt were criminals equal to the inmates. "Those taking part in the jailbreak by providing keys to the cells and weapons are, just like the inmates, criminal minds," said the newspaper, in a commentary titled "From guards to criminals?"

"How can anyone think of receiving money, and we are talking about no less than 8 million colones [US$16,000], to let out a group of...people sentenced for homicide, most of them?" asked the newspaper, which is sold nationwide. "The guards—if they can be called that—who took part in this plan...no matter what happens and whatever their friendships, will have to be tried and punished with all the weight of the law and not be holed up in a police station for their own safety."

"They not only put their own lives at risk for a stingy amount of money but also those of their co-workers, other inmates, and an entire country," the paper went on. "Allowing the escape of dangerous people...also meant a costly police operation, as well as exposing entire families, neighborhoods, and communities to having as neighbors...men who once broke the law and caused irreversible damage. We are sure that ambition and loss of honesty blinded them, and they will have to face up to the consequences."

**Alleged ringleader beaten to death**

Also part of the incident’s immediate fallout, relatives of several maximum-security prisoners at La Reforma began calling media attention to what they coincided in describing as the deplorable conditions under which prisoners are kept. They also revealed mistreatment of inmates by prison guards as well as corruption among the latter.

On May 20—nine days after the jailbreak attempt—relatives of Joehl Araya pointed out by authorities as a leader of the escape attempt, took to the Sala Constitucional of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) a habeas corpus writ drawn up by the maximum-security inmate.

The text, hand-written with a ballpoint pen on a notebook page, included allegations of physical aggression by prison guards, "up to the point where we were left unconscious because of the amount of kicks, punches, and baton hits they gave us to the head, face, ribs, arms, and legs." Araya continued, "They spit in our food, they throw coffee at our face, and they threaten us by telling us they have everything planned to kill us, but that first they’re going to make us suffer for some time."

Two days after his family handed in the habeas corpus petition, Araya was found dead in his cell. The prisoner was serving fifty years for having escaped from La Reforma in 2006, after having been tried and found guilty of killing a prison guard.

Araya had been sent to prison that year for several crimes committed in 1992, including armed robbery and impersonating a police officer to rob a house.
The autopsy, leaked to, showed the inmate died from a beating. "An accurate blow to the head, not visible, was what caused ‘the king of escapes,’ Joehl Araya, to die in the maximum security’s dreaded Hummer cell in La Reforma," the newspaper reported on June 16. "A source close to the case assured Diario Extra that the beating was caused by a penitentiary guard who apparently kicked and punched him, mainly on the head."

The beating "caused an aneurism, which is the same as a brain hemorrhage," added the paper, which reported that "the autopsy was done by a neurologist."

also reported then that "inmates at maximum security were the ones who assured [the paper] that Joehl was beaten to death." Prisoners said that, "after the foiled escape, guards beat the man like a punching bag, the beatings were daily and at all times."

"'He knew who the officers were who provided the keys for the escape, who are the ones who peddle drugs and bring cell phones to our cells in exchange for amounts of money in the millions [of colones] he gave them,' the prisoners added," reported the newspaper. "After he was captured again," immediately following the May 11 incident, "his days were numbered, since it was known for a fact that they were going to beat him to death."

"Once he was again stashed away, Joehl knew his true sentence was death...in his cold and dark cell," said the morning daily. "Even the food he ate was brought in as for another prisoner to avoid poisoning by the police, as they had supposedly swore to him they would do."

During a visit to maximum security in La Reforma on June 4, París told reporters that a remote-control system, with an electric or magnetic mechanism, would replace the locks now used to secure the cells. This is to prevent another incident like the one on May 11 from occurring again, said the minister, who did not mention the possible date for the measure to be carried out, although he underlined the change should take place in months.

Guillermo Ugalde, head of the Costa Rican Policía Penitentiaria, then said the idea came up after a visit he made, with three other jail-system officials, to several jails in Nebraska. "The idea is that...the [cell] door doesn’t open if it isn’t activated from a control panel," Ugalde explained.

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