Horrific Deadly Fire Raises Questions about Honduran Prison System

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Yet again, an Honduran prison burns, inmates are charred, only this time the incident is deemed the worst in the country’s history. As a gruesome flashback to similar events in 2003 and 2004, this month’s prison fire in Honduras has caused shock and concern in this Central American nation.

Official estimates place at 360 the number of inmates killed by the flames, which destroyed most of Section 6 in the Penitenciaría Nacional de Comayagua, also known as Granja Penal de Comayagua, taking its name from the central Honduran city where it is located, some 80 km northwest of Tegucigalpa, the country’s capital.

The stage for the first of these events was the Centro Penal El Porvenir, in the northern port city of La Ceiba, some 400 km north of Tegucigalpa, where 67 lives were lost. The second incident, which killed 107 people, occurred in the Centro Penal in the northern city of San Pedro Sula—Honduras’ major textile maquila industrial center—some 250 km northwest of the country’s capital (NotiCen, May 20, 2004).

Honduran human rights activist Bertha Oliva, head of the Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH), points out that the three events are nothing but a chain of state-terror actions aimed, in general, at causing widespread fear and, specifically, at reducing prison overpopulation, a major social problem that for years has not been a government priority.

A report issued this month by the Comisionado Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CONADEH) said the country’s 24 penitentiaries are fit to lodge up to 8,280 inmates. However, the general prison population in 2004 was 10,931—an excess of 2,651; by 2007 it had risen to 11,673—3,393 above the maximum—and in 2010 it was estimated at 13,280—5,000 more over the original figure.

The Comayagua fire "clearly points to terror actions coming from the state," Oliva told NotiCen, adding that "fires in penitentiaries have been set."

"The thing is that, on the one hand, they send you the message, so some people say, 'yes, they were criminals,' because they’re ingraining popular imagery with the idea that they [the victims] were criminals...that it doesn’t matter if they die," Oliva said. "But the truth is that it’s a systematic practice to burn penitentiaries, because there’s been no punishment, no investigation, no accountability."

President promises action

Hours after the Comayagua prison fire—from the evening of Feb. 14 through the early hours of Feb. 15—Honduran President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo announced on national radio and television the suspension of Danilo Orellana, head of the country’s jail system, and commissioner Rommel Martínez, head of the Comayagua penitentiary.
Lobo also announced a review of conditions inmates live under in the country’s prisons and ordered the state-owned Empresa Nacional de Energía Eléctrica (ENEE) to check the electrical system in each jail, "because that could be one of the causes of the fires."

The president said an independent investigation of the Comayagua incident would be carried out within the framework of Honduran law, adding it would "guarantee reliable and trustworthy results and conclusions."

**US experts say fire was accidental**

The US Embassy in Honduras reported, in a Feb. 16 press release, that, at the request of the Lobo administration, the US government was sending an international response team (IRT) from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) to investigate the fire.

Five days later, the embassy reported that, "after completing its investigation and analysis of the site," the IRT, "working in conjunction with Honduran authorities from the Public Ministry, National Criminal Investigation Directorate (DNIC), and the Honduran Fire Department, have determined that the cause of the fire was accidental."

"Based on the IRT’s findings, the cause of the fire is believed to have been an open flame—the source of which could include, but is not limited to, a cigarette, a lighter, matches, etc.—although the actual ignition source was not recovered," added a second press release.

"The fire is believed to have begun in the area of the top two bunk beds in the fourth column along the western side of the prison’s module six, which ignited nearby flammable materials," said the experts’ report. "During the course of the investigation, the IRT was able to rule out other possible causes of the fire, such as a lightning strike, electrical causes, or the use of a flammable or combustible liquid."

"Based on its findings, the IRT will prepare a formal report to be submitted from ATF headquarters to the US Embassy in Honduras for passage to the Honduran government," the diplomatic mission also reported. "While the cause of the fire has been classified as accidental, this tragic event has focused attention on inadequate safety practices within the Honduran prison system, such as overcrowding, the presence of flammable materials, insufficient personnel on duty, and the lack of a viable evacuation plan for inmates. The United States urges swift action in devising and enacting necessary reforms to ensure the safety, health, and human rights of Honduran prisoners in order to prevent similar tragedies in the future."

**Public blames "criminal action"**

But human rights and civil-society organizations are not buying the explanation that the incident was an accident. Neither are most Hondurans, according to results of an opinion poll published Feb. 18 by the morning daily La Tribuna, which showed that 72% of those asked, "What do you think was the cause of the fire that destroyed the Comayagua prison?" answered that it was "criminal action," while 14% said "burning a mattress," 9% replied "other [causes]," and 5% pointed to a "short circuit."

Backing their allegations, grassroots organization point out facts such as people hearing shots being fired inside the prison—as registered by a cell-phone video recorded by a neighbor—while the fire was raging, as well as inmates desperately calling out for cells to be opened as they were caught by
the flames, and prison guards only allowing firefighters in the prison some 20 or 25 minutes after the latter arrived.

Oliva also told NotiCen that, two days prior to the incident, the head of the Comayagua prison warned a local television channel about the installation being in such a state that an incident—like the one that actually happened—could occur at any time. She mentioned relatives’ accounts of inmates having been moved, also two days before, from their assigned cells to other quarters, an unusual move designed, according to the human rights activist, to prevent victims from being accounted for and identified.

Oliva added that keys to the cells were taken off the place where they are usually kept, something that prevented prison personnel from opening the bars at the start of the fire and saving lives.

"We’re facing a phenomenon of terror in the people, in society as such, with shocking levels of impunity, and clear messages: ‘We’re the ones who give order here. So what? And we’re going keep causing fires,’" Oliva stressed. "That is the pattern we’re seeing. It’s been three prisons burned, and no punishment."

"And there are coincidences that one doesn’t manage to understand," said Oliva, who went on to ask, about the prison fires, "Why is it that...they’ve always happened at night, and [prison] directors have never been there? The other thing is that those jailed in these prisons...are people with no access or closeness to power groups, to power itself. The state has all the responsibility, by action or omission, in all three cases."

In the context of the Comayagua incident, "some had already served their sentences, other had been waiting for many years to be sentenced," in both cases because of "pure state negligence," according to Oliva’s vivid, detailed account. "And another thing is that other people were there because they had been drinking or had been found stoned, so they were taken there, which means they weren’t necessarily criminals."

Oliva also charged that the scene of the incident was severely contaminated, thus destroying traces of evidence, when, two or three days after the fire, survivor inmates were ordered to wash the cells that were not destroyed, for prisoners to be placed there. "This should’ve been prevented by the Ministerio Público, and the place should’ve been closed instead of being washed," she added. "What has happened in the Comayagua prison center is genocide."

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