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Prison-Generated Crimes Lead Honduran Authorities to Block Cell-Phone Service in Jails

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Crimes such as extortion, carried out from Honduran prisons, as well as hits and robberies planned in the country’s jails, led authorities last month, in an effort to counter such illegal activities, to block cell-phone services in the 24 penitentiaries nationwide.

It was one of the first measures taken by the new administration, headed by President Juan Orlando Hernández, who, on Jan. 27, succeeded former President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo (2010-2014)—both of the rightist, pro-military Partido Nacional (PN)—for the 2014-2018 period.

The measure is aimed at preventing convicts from running criminal networks from within prisons walls and cells, and it covers a 1 km radius. In an immediate response, inmates’ ingenuity began aiming at more-sophisticated technology—satellite telephones—and their anger against the measure triggered mutiny attempts in at least two prisons.

The new government’s action has precedents dating back to last year, when, on June 1, a special committee took charge of jail administration throughout the country. Thus, the Comisión Especial de Centros Penales, headed by lawyer José Ávila, became responsible for what the local morning daily El Heraldo described as "universities of crime."

The security and social situation in Honduran prisons is, at best, appalling. Human rights commissioner (Comisionado Nacional de los Derechos Humanos, CONADEH) Ramón Custodio says, "Health conditions are subhuman."

"The country has no rehabilitation system for inmates to be able to reinsert themselves in society, and, actually, many leave [prison] having perfected their anti-social and criminal conduct," Custodio told local media. "The state invests little to solve the inmate problem, although they’re still human persons with human rights."

Within this context, Honduras’ 24 penitentiaries are overcrowded, since their global capacity is some 8,300 people and the present number exceeds 12,000. This leads to, among other critical problems, violence and corruption (NotiCen, May 20, 2004, Jan. 12, 2006, and May 8, 2008).

Fires and riots cost hundreds of lives

Registers by the commissioner's bureau show that, in the past decade, some 644 prisoners died in several Honduran jails, during prison fires and massacres. The same source says that, in 2011-2012, close to 420 inmates died, some 360 of whom lost their lives during a fire at the Centro Penal, in the central city of Comayagua, some 82 km northeast of Tegucigalpa, the country’s capital (NotiCen, March 1, 2012).

As for corruption, Custodio said the Honduran prison system is a breeding ground for "institutional corruption," as jail security personnel allow for drugs, cell phones, liquor, weapons—including firearms and grenades—to be smuggled into jails.
When it comes to health, overcrowding adds to the critical situation. José Ruales, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) representative in Honduras, say HIV and tuberculosis are rampant in Honduran prisons because of deplorable living conditions, overcrowding, and also because of budget limitations for inmates to be properly treated and informed, especially about HIV.

The prison budget earmarks some 11 lempiras (barely US$.50) per day per prisoner.

**Inmates eye satellite phones**

Regarding prisoners’ use of cell phones for extortion and other crimes, in December Congress passed the Ley de Limitación de Servicios de Telefonía Móvil Celular y Comunicaciones Personales en los Centros Penales. The bill prevents telecommunications operators from offering services inside prisons and other penitentiary installations throughout the nation.

Since cell phones are constantly brought into jails, where chips and recharges are sold, telecommunications companies were ordered to dismantle mobile-phone antennas from those facilities, and company employees in charge of the task were threatened by inmates, according to local press reports.

This year, on Feb. 8, Tigo—the brand used by UK-based Millicom in fifteen nations in Africa and Latin America—began the two-week process to block its service in Honduras’ 24 prisons. Five days later, authorities confirmed to Hernández that Tigo and the Brazil-headquartered Claro had managed to complete the process in all the installations.

A government communiqué said, "The Honduran president has been informed that a percentage of citizens were affected by the implementation of this law, which is only aimed at preventing illegal acts from being ordered from inside jails."

Hernández then said that he ordered telecommunications and security authorities "to find alternatives so we may minimize the impact caused by this measure on residents or workers in the areas around penitentiaries, but maintaining compliance with the law." The same day, Hernández sacked two of the prison committee’s members—Ávila and fellow lawyer Delmy Anarda Banegas.

Shortly after, the president told Congress that, following an evaluation he carried out with Lobo—who had set up the work group, he and the former president saw that "there is much bureaucracy" in prisons and that "robberies, kidnappings, and murders were allowed to be ordered from prisons."

"Because of excess bureaucracy, the leaders of those criminal bands operating within prisons could not be moved to maximum-security areas," Hernández said, adding that "no prison director is going to justify to me that someone has two, three, four telephones. All that must have gone through somewhere."

The president, a former head of Congress, said he aimed at ending prison corruption, although "it's not easy," and will take some time, but "that's the order I received from the Honduran people" in the elections.

**Police describe hopeless situation**

On Feb. 14, one day after the president’s statements, Ramón Sabillón, head of the Policía Nacional de Honduras (PNH), reported that prisoners at the Penitenciaría Nacional de Támara, some 10 km
northwest of Tegucigalpa, attempted to mutiny, as a protest against the measure regarding cell phones, but he said that "everything is under the control of security authorities."

Just three days later, Sabillón admitted that organized-crime gangs control most prisons nationwide, have become a "monster with 1,000 heads," and their rules "must be obeyed, like it or not."

As an example, he told a local television station that during more than four years a person paid some 5,000 lempiras (about US$240) as part of an extortion scheme launched from inside one prison, and an inmate was able to obtain "plasma TV screens, cell phones, iPads, and videos, buy weapons, and even get cable television."

Sabillón said victims of extortion were expected to report such incidents. He also said that authorities have reports indicating purchases of satellite telephones having been made from prisons, adding that they are not ruling out that the phones—costing from US$700 to more than US$1,000 each—could probably be already in several prisons.

Norma Moreno, spokesperson for the government’s Fuerza Nacional Antiextorsión (FNA), said measures are being taken to prevent inmates from having access to such telephones directly connecting to a telecommunications satellite, thus avoiding easily blocked cell-phone signals.

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