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LADB Staff

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## **Bolivian Government Blames Drug Traffickers for Prisoner Hunger Strike**

by LADB Staff

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Bolivian inmates have been on a hunger strike protesting prison conditions since Jan. 26. The government says it will not give in to pressure from the prisoners, despite the death of one of the strikers on Feb. 3. Meanwhile, authorities are trying to find alternative care for thousands of children who live with their parents in the penitentiaries.

Prisoners began the hunger strike Jan. 25, after the government said it would not grant certain privileges to inmates convicted of drug-related crimes. Within a week, more than 3,000 prisoners throughout the country had joined the protest. At issue is the practice of allowing prisoners who have completed half their sentence to leave during the day to work outside the prison. Inmates convicted on drug charges, an estimated 47% of the prison population, are not eligible for the day passes.

Inmates also are protesting harsh living conditions in the often-overcrowded Bolivian jails, and they are demanding a speedier appeal process. Strikers include both men and women. On Feb. 2, seven women prisoners, including two who are pregnant, tied themselves to crosses to dramatize their demands. Many other prisoners have sewn their lips shut.

### *Government rejects deal with drug dealers*

The government at first refused to negotiate with the prisoners and blamed drug traffickers for promoting the protest. "It would be totally incongruous, illegal, unconstitutional, and immoral to enter into negotiations with those imprisoned for drug-trafficking crimes, giving them benefits that would violate the law," said Interior Minister Guido Nayar on Feb. 1. He said the protests were the first challenge to a new national strategy to combat drug trafficking. At the end of 1997, tougher laws were introduced aimed at ridding the country of drug trafficking by 2002, a pledge by President Hugo Banzer (see NotiSur, 09/26/97).

Although the government will not discuss demands to give drug traffickers the privileges enjoyed by other prisoners, it did begin negotiating on other issues on Feb. 2. The director of penitentiaries, Jose Orias, said the government would discuss anything except privileges for drug-traffickers. Orias repeated that drug lords had "bought" the striking prisoners. "Inmates who have nothing to do with this problem are being paid and coerced to do this," he said. He promised the strikers at San Sebastian prison in Cochabamba improved treatment, better medical attention, and less crowded living conditions.

The death of an inmate in the Cochabamba prison intensified the resolve of many strikers. Elias Claros Choque had heart failure and fell down a staircase after feeling "extremely weak" and suffering from headaches and stomach pains, said Osvaldo Siles, head of the strike committee in

the Cochabamba prison. Angel Moncada, head of police in Cochabamba, disputed the prisoners' version of events, saying Claros Choque died from the fall down the staircase, which was unrelated to the strike. Results of an autopsy to determine the cause of death have not been released.

### *Hundreds of children live in prisons*

Meanwhile, another government decision regarding penal institutions has raised tensions. The government says it will remove hundreds of children living with their parents in the prisons and place them with relatives or in shelters. Approximately 2,100 children live in Bolivian prisons. The decision followed the rape and murder of a six-year-old girl by an inmate in the San Pedro prison in La Paz on Jan. 3. Less than a month later, a two-month-old child died of asphyxiation in the San Sebastian prison, where she and six siblings shared a small cell with their parent, who is serving a sentence for drug trafficking.

Prison officials said the child probably died when the parent, who was drunk, fell on her. Following the tragedies, the Interior Ministry said children of prisoners would be removed from 16 prisons and sent to live with their extended families or in shelters. The government's million-dollar campaign, "Don't jail my child," will also try to find "godparents" to help care for children who have no relatives with whom they can live. Infants would remain with their mothers, however. "Children in the jails do not distinguish between right and wrong, and wrong is normal in their daily lives," said Jose Orias. "When the children play cops and robbers, no one wants to be the police."

Children's advocates, however, said this could be the result of widespread police abuse in Bolivia. In most Bolivian penal institutions, children work alongside their parents doing carpentry, preparing and selling food, and doing other jobs just as they would if the family lived outside the prison walls. They suffer frequent abuse, however, and are often incorporated into the criminal activities of the inmates. The international nongovernmental organization Defense of Children opposed the government's decision to remove the children.

Director Elizabeth Patino said most children in the prisons are there because they have no alternative, and the government cannot take them away from their parents unless it can ensure their protection in other institutions or with placement families. "Although penitentiaries are inadequate and dangerous for children, the government cannot issue a decree that they must leave the prisons without knowing where they will go," said Patino. She added that the government does not have enough shelters for children, and if children are to be placed in foster homes, a thorough investigation of the placement family must be made to guarantee the child's well-being. (Sources: Inter Press Service, 01/27/98; Associated Press, 02/01/98; The Miami Herald, 01/07/98, 02/03/98; Reuter, 02/01/98, 02/03/98; BBC, 02/03/98; Spanish news service EFE, 01/19/98, 01/22/98, 01/29/98, 01/30/98, 02/02/98, 02/04/98; CNN, 02/04/98; Notimex, 02/03/98, 02/05/98)

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