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Prison and Street Protests in Ecuador

by LADB Staff

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Prison protests and riots in Quito led to several hundred hostages being held for four days and later left one inmate dead and three wounded. Demanding better conditions and an end to widespread corruption, inmates captured national attention for several days, and the protests spread to other facilities. Outside prison walls, meanwhile, indigenous peoples' protests on the streets of various Ecuadoran cities put more political pressure on President Lucio Gutierrez.

Hostage standoff in jails

Inmates complaining about "deplorable conditions" at the Garcia Moreno prison in Quito took more than 300 visitors hostage the weekend of Feb. 14-15. Press outlets reported differing numbers of hostages, as did prisoners and spokespersons for the government.

Washington Grueso, a leader of the men's prison revolt in Quito, said on Feb. 15 that inmates were holding 470 people 70 men, 280 women, and 120 children to protest overcrowding, long sentences, and other grim conditions including a lack of running water. However, National Prison security director Marco Morales told Agence France-Presse the inmates were holding 321 people, including 218 Ecuadoran women, 51 women mostly from Colombia and Peru, one Italian woman, and one Venezuelan woman.

El Universo of Ecuador said 321 adults and 120 children, or a total of 441, were being held. The 876 inmates did not appear to be armed, said Morales, who spoke from inside the prison that was designed to hold 600 but was packed with more than 1,100 inmates. An Ecuadoran Red Cross team was allowed to enter the facility to check on the health of hostages and inmates. They evacuated at least a dozen sick people from a rooftop. Most of the hostages had come to visit jailed family members.

Grueso said there had been no violence but did not offer further details about the hostages' welfare. Inmates said about 300 friends and family members had voluntarily stayed after visiting hours on Feb. 15 to join the peaceful protest. Authorities said the prisoners welded doors shut and held the guests against their will.

"I am very happy to get out," Silvia Yunga told television Channel 4 after being released from the prison. "We slept on the floor, we didn't have any food, and we felt horrible. I lost my job because I was inside they wouldn't let anybody go." About 350 women inmates at the El Inca prison in Quito similarly launched a hunger strike to protest conditions but took no hostages. They continued the hunger strike after the Garcia Moreno inmates released their captive visitors.

State of emergency

After successful negotiations, the hostages were released on Feb. 18. On the day after the hostages were released, a fight broke out in the prison, resulting in one death and three injuries. This came after the prisoners had negotiated a compromise with the government to analyze their situation. The compromise included a commitment to send the Congress a set of legal reforms and proposals for a new law to allow shorter prison sentences and better living conditions.

Ecuador's government had declared a state of emergency in the prison system on Jan. 15 after a series of protests. About 1,500 inmates were released because they had been held for more than a year without trial. The move caused a backlash after it became known that the freed prisoners included accused murderers, drug traffickers, and rapists. Indigenous protests against Gutierrez heat up Indigenous groups that oppose President Gutierrez also squared off against Ecuadoran authorities.

The Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas de Ecuador (CONAIE) called national mobilizations against Gutierrez's government to "demonstrate our strength," said spokespersons from Pachakutik, CONAIE's political arm. Gutierrez rose to power with the help of indigenous groups, but has since alienated them (see NotiSur, 2004-01-30).

In the central province of Cotopaxi, violent confrontations between police and protestors left at least two injured and twenty arrested, as marchers demanded better public works and infrastructure. One 60 year-old woman died of bullet wounds suffered during those protests, according to the indigenous group's press releases.

Tensions have been high, and indigenous people have complained of threats of repression since there was an attempted assassination against CONAIE leader Jose Yungan. During the attempted assassination, Yungan's son was gravely wounded.

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