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Riot Prison Kills Five in Peru

by LADB Staff
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Rioting killed five Peruvian prisoners in Lurigancho prison in Lima this month, exposing the massively overcrowded facility to international attention and threatening the career of Peru's prisons director. A confrontation between rival gangs in the prison left five inmates dead and at least 18 others wounded on Feb. 8, officials said.

Police had largely re-established control at Lurigancho at that time, but were still meeting pockets of resistance, said Wilfredo Pedraza, the national prison director, who faced calls for his resignation after the deadly riot. Fight over control of prison wings, say officials "What we have is a conflict between organized mafias in the prison that are trying to assume control of each others' wing by force," Pedraza told CPN radio.

Jose Avila, of Peru's human rights ombud's office, put the number of wounded at 24 and said all of the dead or wounded had been shot. Deputy Alcides Chamorro, who heads the legislature's justice commission, blamed the clash on overcrowding and lax security.

Lurigancho, Peru's most overpopulated prison, was built in the 1960s for 1,800 inmates but holds more than 7,000 and lacks metal detectors, he said. "Firearms enter the prison because of various problems: negligence, corruption, or because of inadequate security at the entrances of the prison," Pedraza said. "It's a reality that I'm not going to hide." More than 50 guns were found in the prison in 2003 and 44 in 2004. After the riot, police said they had found at least four revolvers, three pistols, one grenade, and a great number of knife parts.

The week before the riot, a key witness in the trials of former spy chief Vladimiro Montesinos and airline executive Fernando Zevallos was shot dead at a prison in northern Peru by another inmate in what Pedraza called a "contract killing." The witness a US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) informant was supposed to get special protection in the jail because of his testimony.

Calls for prisons director's resignation

The president of the congressional Commission on Housing and Construction, Jose Luis Risco Montalvan, called repeatedly for the immediate resignation of Wilfredo Pedraza and the complete removal of the personnel charged with maintaining Lurigancho. "Ever since the month of December when I visited the jail, I warned the corresponding authorities about the deficiencies and the demands that the inmates were presenting, but I was never listened to," said Risco. "Now it has been demonstrated that the policy of regret has been institutionalized over a policy of prevention." "If Pedraza knew that mafias or gangs existed among the inmates, what did he do to avoid these confrontations?" asked Risco, who called on the ringleaders of the riot to be transferred to a maximum-security prison.
In statements to the press, Pedraza said he was going to decide whether to resign after investigations of the riot and the assassination of an inmate in the Pucallpa jail were concluded, reversing previous avowals that he was not planning to quit. However, he said he did not feel responsible for the incidents. He said the chaos that existed in Lurigancho was an exception and did not exist in other prisons around the country.

**Argentine riot kills eight**

Deadly prison rioting struck the South American continent again within days of the incident in Lurigancho as eight died in a riot in Cordoba, Argentina, Feb. 10-11. Prisoners took hostages, but released them on Feb. 11. Of the eight killed in the riot, five were prisoners, two guards, and one a police officer, according to official reports. Human rights groups in Argentina said that the riot highlighted deep problems in the country's penitentiaries.

Prison violence in Latin America remains a concern of human rights organizations. Some recent incidents around the region, besides those in Argentina and Peru, include:

Inmates armed with hand grenades and guns rioted at a prison in Venezuela in September, killing at least six inmates.

In April 2003 in Honduras, 69 people were killed during a prison riot. Fire killed 103 prisoners in May 2004 (see NotiCen, 2004-05-20).

Brazil, hit by frequent prison rioting (see NotiSur, 2002-09-20), suffered 19 dead in February 2001 when an uprising at one prison spread via inmate cell phones to 28 other prisons.

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