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Bloody January Spotlights Deplorable Conditions in Brazilian Prisons

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Ten incidents in eight states across Brazil left over 140 prison inmates dead in January. With the fourth-largest prison population in the world and a history of overcrowded, unsanitary conditions, the country’s penitentiaries are potential tinderboxes. Those conditions are longstanding—a 1992 rebellion in São Paulo’s Carandiru prison left 111 dead when police regained control of the facility (NotiSur, Oct. 13, 1992, March 9, 1993, Sept 20, 2002). In 2012, on the 20th anniversary of that infamous conflict, Amnesty International (AI) declared Brazil’s prison system “medieval” (NotiSur, March 2, 2001).

Judge Luís Carlos Valois used a similar term to describe Brazil’s prison conditions last month in the aftermath of a prison riot in Manaus, the capital of Amazonas state, when rival gangs took over the Complexo Penitenciário Anísio Jobim. Valois was the lead negotiator attempting to defuse tensions, but the state could not halt a vicious killing spree that left 56 dead, the majority decapitated.

The Jan. 1 massacre was only the prelude to a gruesome fortnight, with further gang-fueled killings in prisons across the country, including the states of Alagoas, Pernambuco, Roraima, São Paulo, Rio Grande do Norte, Paraná, and Santa Catarina. The bloody two weeks were capped off with the death of at least 26 inmates in Natal’s Alacuz prison, in Rio Grande do Norte. Public officials believe that most of the violent acts were repercussions from the Manaus riot. Human Rights Watch’s 2017 World Report singled out Brazil for a “cycle of violence” fueled by mass incarceration that ferments criminal gangs.

Manaus massacre

The New Year’s Day riot in Manaus was a dispute between the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) (NotiSur, May 26, 2006), considered Brazil’s most powerful drug gang, and the Família do Norte (FDN), a gang based in Brazil’s north that has risen to challenge São Paulo-based PCC. Those two gangs, along with the Rio de Janeiro-based Comando Vermelho (CV), have been duking it out for control over prisons since last year.

In the resulting 17-hour standoff, several members of the prison’s staff were held as hostages. Meanwhile, rival gang members were decapitated, drawn and quartered, and otherwise mutilated in clashes throughout the facility. The riot was “the biggest prison massacre in our state’s history,” according to Amazonas state’s public security secretary, Sergio Fontes.

Valois, who successfully resolved the revolt, told TerraNews that conditions inside the prison were ripe for chaos. “Manaus’ penitentiary system is similar to the rest of Brazil’s, overcrowded and with little support,” he said. “[The prison] has cells for eight with 30 people inside. People [are] sleeping below a cement bed, and in the heat of Manaus.”

Yet even then, Manaus “might not even be among the 10 worst,” Valois said. “The interior of Amazonas is like the Middle Ages.”
Family members of the Manaus victims were traumatized by graphic videos and images that trickled out via mobile phones. One inmate’s wife identified her decapitated husband’s body only because of a tattoo visible on his torso.

As chief negotiator, Valois was the leading eyewitness to the carnage. “I never saw anything like that in my life. All those bodies, the blood,” Valois wrote on Facebook. He told Terra News, “My ability to see other human beings has been affected, because that monstrosity was committed by a human being. If a human has the seed of that act inside him, then we all do.”

**Jaded reaction**

The response from Brazilian officials to the epidemic of prison violence was anemic at best, prompting widespread criticism and suggesting minimal political appetite for reform. Amazonas Governor José Melo said, “I can tell you there were no saints. There were rapists and killers there.”

National Youth Secretary Bruno Júlio went even further in an interview with O Globo newspaper. “There should be more killings,” he said. “There should be one massacre per week.” The ensuing social media firestorm prompted him to resign.

President Michel Temer ([NotiSur, June 24, 2016, and Sept. 30, 2016](#)) waited five days to opine on the incident, calling it only a “tragic accident.” The muted response prompted Marcelo Freixo, a state deputy from Rio de Janeiro and a prison reform advocate, to describe “a contamination of public opinion” toward prisoners. “There is more desire for revenge than for justice,” he lamented.

**Loss of control**

Part of this attitude stems from public sentiment that authorities have lost control of Brazil’s penal system.

“The prison establishment is chaos, and only those in the middle of that chaos are capable of administrating it,” explained criminal lawyer Roberto Tardelli to Sputnik News. “And who are these administrators if not the prisoners themselves? The public is certain: Authorities have lost any capacity to discipline the prisons.”

With the specter of Carandiru in the Brazilian consciousness, the public has started to wonder if January’s violence represents the “new Carandiru.” Tardelli warned that without significant reform, such episodes are going to become a more regular occurrence. “We are on the cusp of a new Carandiru,” he asserted.

In a rebuke to those hoping that Brazil will learn from the Carandiru rebellion, last September an appeals court cleared 74 police officers of their convictions from the 1992 incident. The judges declared “there was no massacre” and that all killings were in self-defense.

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