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## Guatemalan Prison Inmates Take Hostages, Exchange Fire With Security Forces

by Deborah Tyroler

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On March 26 at about noon, between 100 and 250 inmates at Guatemala's largest prison farm, Pavon, raided the prison armory, and attempted to flee. In an exchange of gunfire with guards and police, at least six people were killed. Pavon is located about 20 km. east of Guatemala City. The rebellious inmates took advantage of the presence of hundreds of relatives of prisoners who were visiting the facility on Easter Sunday. Some were taken hostage. News reports from several sources were contradictory in terms of how many inmates participated in the rebellion; the number of persons killed and wounded in the firefight on Sunday; how many hostages the prisoners were holding; the number of security forces surrounding the prison; and, the content and timing of prisoners' demands. A summary of developments follows: \* Miguel Campos, director general of prisons, told reporters on Monday that he was reviewing demands of about 250 armed inmates. The New York Times reported that about 100 inmates captured weapons and staged the escape attempt. AFP said "about 200" prisoners raided a weapons depository and tried to escape. Late on Monday, government officials said 75 to 100 prisoners had joined in the revolt. \* On Sunday night, Notimex reported a toll of at least 15 dead and a dozen wounded. A spokesperson for the firemen told a Notimex reporter that the number of wounded was unknown, but most likely much greater than 12. A judge requesting anonymity told AP that three guards and three inmates died Sunday. Prison spokesperson Conrado Monroy said a fourth guard died of injuries on Monday. An unnamed witness interviewed on a local radio station said about 20 people were wounded in the battle on Sunday. AFP reported that early Monday eight bodies were evacuated by firemen from the prison, and that some 30 people were reported injured. Unofficial sources cited by AFP said that among the dead were two guards, three prisoners, and a woman visitor. The local media reported that the real toll could be much higher than the eight known dead, and 30 injured. The government provided no figures. Fireman Alejandro Giamattei told reporters that four bodies had been removed from the prison. Guards who requested anonymity told reporters that the toll was higher. Unofficial reports said up to 15 people had been killed. \* By Monday morning, according to AP, at least 300 police and 400 soldiers armed with rifles and submachine guns surrounded the prison farm. AFP reported that about 2,000 police surrounded the prison. An air force helicopter hovered overhead. \* Television station Notisiete said about 400 people were being held hostage. One of the negotiators, reporter Ricardo Gatica Trejo of the Guatemala City newspaper El Grafico, said the number of hostages was not clear. Early on Monday, prison officials reported that inmates were holding 626 people hostage. Prison spokesperson Conrado Monroy said many of those people were relatives of the prisoners and chose to remain inside the prison farm. He told reporters, "They fear that if they leave authorities will take reprisals against the rebel inmates." Later on Monday, Carlos Ramos Mocada, inspector general of prisons, said 154 children, 365 women and 107 men were inside the prison who were not inmates, and most had been visitors. Monroy said among the hostages are six firefighters, a Red Cross worker and an undetermined number of guards. \* El Grafico reporter Trejo said inmate demands included amnesties or reduced sentences, a change in prison officials, and better food and treatment. Another negotiator, Fire Department Cmdr. Alejandro Giamattei

Falla, said the inmates also demanded to talk with federal human rights attorney general Gonzalo Menendez de la Riva. An unnamed fireman quoted by AFP said, "The inmates are demanding a general pardon, dismissal of the warden, and that authorities reconnect water and electricity that was cut off on Sunday." Prison spokesperson Monroy said that Sunday night the rebels demanded better food and reduced sentences, but that on Monday they said wanted to be flown to Cuba. He did not elaborate. According to an AFP photographer who spent 15 hours in the prison (see below), the inmates had originally demanded a plane to take them to Cuba, but later said they would settle for assurances against reprisals for their actions in the riot, dismissal of the prison warden and reduced sentences. \* According to an AFP photographer, Rolando Gonzalez, who spent 15 hours inside the prison along with a Mexican television reporter and a Guatemala City councilman, the rebellious inmates were "holding the children as their `guarantee.'" Gonzalez was taken hostage Sunday and released Monday through the intervention of the Red Cross. The television reporter and the councilman were also freed. Gonzalez said, "They are sentenced to between 20 and 75 years in prison. All are older than 30 and say their lives have no meaning. They say they are willing to kill their (hostages) and then to die." The photographer added that police indicated they "had no qualms" about storming the prison, to which the inmates have pledged to respond by "liquidating their hostages." According to Gonzalez, the atmosphere inside the prison was tense, and many of the inmates had been drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana. He identified the leader of the revolt as Rodolfo Lopez, convicted of three murder counts, and sentenced to 75 years in prison. Gonzalez said Lopez was supported by the 62 inmates in the maximum security ward called Triangle No. 4. Gonzalez said the uprising began when about 250 prisoners raided a weapons depository and tried to escape. Nine guards were shot to death, he said, and inmates stripped the guards and threw their nude bodies out of the maximum security block onto the basketball courts and soccer field. Next, according to Gonzalez, when a Guatemalan military helicopter fired on the maximum security area, five or six people hostages and prisoners were killed. Gonzalez said inmates had seized 150,000 rounds of ammunition, 15,000 grenades and enough gasoline and paint thinner to make Molotov cocktails. \* Guatemala's main human rights legal authority, Gonzalo Menendez de la Riva spent five hours inside the prison on Monday acting as head negotiator. He did not comment on the substance of the talks with the prisoners when he left to confer with Interior Minister Roberto Valle Valdizan and President Vinicio Cerezo. But Menendez de la Riva said he had asked the rebels to stay calm "so that in the coming hours we can reach a solution that will benefit the women and children who are suffering hardship for lack of food." \* On Tuesday, March 28, negotiations between the prisoners and authorities continued. At this time, officials said that the inmates were holding "more than 360 persons" hostage. The 2.5 sq.mi. facility was designed to hold about 800 prisoners. Officials and inmates said Pavon currently houses over 1,300 prisoners. (Basic data from AP, AFP, DPA, Xinhua, 03/27/89; Notimex, 03/26-28/89; New York Times, 03/28/89)

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