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Authorities Worry About Widespread Corruption in Mexico's Prison System

by Carlos Navarro

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It is common knowledge that corruption has been a major problem for Mexico's law-enforcement and corrections system, with members of the police and prison staff accepting bribes to protect groups associated with organized crime. But sometimes an incident occurs that appears beyond belief, as was a recent case in the region known as La Laguna, which includes the twin cities of Torreón in Coahuila state and Gómez Palacio in Durango state. In that incident, which occurred on July 18, a handful of inmates at the Durango state prison in Gómez Palacio were allowed to leave the prison so they could carry out a murder at a party in Torreón with weapons borrowed from prison guards. The operation, which is thought to be connected to the drug wars that have plagued northern Mexico in recent months, apparently occurred with the full knowledge of the prison management.

In the incident, the inmates were transported to the Italia Inn restaurant in Torreón, where they opened fire randomly at a crowd gathered for a birthday party, killing 17 people. "The criminals carried out the execution as part of a settling of accounts against members of rival gangs tied to organized crime," said Ricardo Nájera, a spokesperson for the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR).

Nájera noted that not all the victims were the original targets, meaning that innocent bystanders also lost their lives. "Unfortunately, the criminals also carried out cowardly killings of innocent civilians," he said.

Inmates at Durango prison employed as assassins in three massacres

Policía Federal Preventiva (PFP) officials said authorities are investigating the possibility that the killings might have been ordered by an organization known as Gente Nueva, affiliated with the Sinaloa cartel. "The participation of members of Gente Nueva is one of the lines of investigation that we are following to clarify the Torreón incident," said Ramón Pequeño, chief of the PFP's anti-drug division.

The revelation that officials at the prison, known as the Centro de Readaptación Social (CERESO) Número 2, were directly involved in a case of obvious corruption was at best unsettling to a public already used to shenanigans by public officials. In most other cases involving prison corruption, guards looked the other way while prisoners escaped. In this case, the prisoners returned to their cells after having carried out the executions.

The PGR immediately ordered the detention of prison director Margarita Rojas and three other officials while conducting a full investigation into the incident. Initial results of the probe indicated that this is at least the third time that prison inmates have been used to carry out executions in Torreón this year, one in January and another in May. The same types of weapons were used in all three incidents, which resulted in a combined total of 35 deaths, the PGR said.

Some political observers pointed out that there were ample signs that Durango officials had been deeply corrupted by the drug cartels. Ricardo Alemán, a columnist for the Mexico City daily newspaper *El Universal*, said authorities had ignored complaints about links between Durango state officials and organized crime, especially in the prison system. Two officials in particular, Margarita Rojas and government secretary Oliverio Reza, who has responsibility for the state prison system, were singled out.

But Alemán suggested that the corruption could reach higher than the prison director and the state government secretary. "It is difficult to explain how a public servant like Margarita Rojas, an important link to criminal groups at the prison in Gómez Palacio, is recognized as 'Woman of the Year' in Durango in 2010," said Alemán. "This could not happen without the complicity of officials at the highest level."

Interior secretary, Congress seek investigation of all prisons

Federal officials have also strongly condemned the corruption. Interior Secretary Francisco Blake Mora, who spoke at a press conference with Nájera, said the incident was another reminder of the "state of deterioration" afflicting many local law-enforcement institutions. Blake, who recently replaced Francisco Gómez Mont as head of the Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB), pledged to investigate who gave the orders for "these cowardly and condemnable acts."

Blake Mora agreed that the recent incident involving inmates from the CERESO Número 2 in Gómez Palacio demonstrated the need for authorities at all levels to conduct a review of penal institutions to determine whether they are facing "security challenges."

The corruption allegations elicited strong concerns from the Mexican Congress, with the leaders of the delegations for the two opposition parties in the upper house, Sen. Manlio Fabio Beltrones of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and Carlos Navarrete of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), calling on President Felipe Calderón and the governors of Mexico's 32 states to thoroughly investigate federal and state prison systems.

Beltrones and Navarrete suggested the situation in La Laguna might be the tip of the iceberg. "If this can happen in one facility, it is possible that it is occurring in others," said Beltrones. "This situation could add another element of political chaos to the country."

There was also outrage in the Chamber of Deputies, where legislators from various parties condemned corruption at the penitentiary in Gómez Palacio. "This situation is stranger than fiction," said PAN Deputy José Luis Ovando Patrón. "How can an inmate who is supposedly behind bars to serve a sentence be allowed to leave and then be loaned weapons by the prison guards to assassinate another person?"

PRD Deputy Teresa del Carmen Incháustegui Romero proposed that the Congress create a special commission comprising deputies and senators who have knowledge of the justice system and public safety to investigate Mexico's prison system. "This situation is an unfortunate signal that corruption is taking root in our institutions," said Incháustegui. "We are facing a critical and worrisome situation, and that is why we have to create this commission."

The PRD also raised allegations that inmates at the facility in Gómez Palacio were used to steal ballot boxes in the July 4 gubernatorial election in Durango. The PRD, which was part of a coalition

that included the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), said there were several complaints about a group of outsiders who took ballots by force from precincts where the coalition candidate was favored. The election was very tight, with José Rosas Aispuro Torres, representing the PAN-PRD coalition, losing the race to his PRI rival by about three percentage points ([SourceMex, 2010-07-07.](#))

In a press statement on July 28, PRD leader Jesús Ortega called on the special elections investigative agency (Fiscalía Especializada para la Atención de Delitos Electorales) to investigate the Durango election and whether inmates from the prison in Gómez Palacio were involved. The PRD said there were similarities in the mode of operation in the case of the ballot-box thefts and the massacre in Torreón. In both cases, the perpetrators wore masks and used rifles.

Federal authorities had no immediate comment on the PRD allegations.

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