

Twenty-three die in Colombia prison revolt over coronavirus conditions

By Julian James
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On Saturday, protests erupted in 13 prisons across Colombia, prompted by panic over the desperate conditions facing inmates in the face of the rapidly spreading coronavirus pandemic. In Bogota's La Modelo prison, the protests were violently suppressed by security forces, resulting in the deaths of 23 inmates, with a further 83 sustaining injuries and 32 requiring immediate hospitalization. Seven prison guards were also injured in the melee, two critically. The incidents came less than a day after a nationwide quarantine was announced by the President Iván Duque.

On the day of the riots, families of prisoners gathered in crowds outside of La Modelo prison to protest and seek information, aware that some inmates were being killed inside. A presidential decree issued on March 12 banned family visitations to prisoners. No information was released by the authorities until the next day, when Colombia's Minister of Justice Margarita Cabello released a video address to the public.

Cabello offered few details aside from the number of dead and wounded, simply describing the events as a "massive and criminal escape attempt," adding with approval that no one had managed to get out. She denied outright that the riots were related to the pandemic extending throughout the country, ignoring prisoners' demands, which included placing elderly and immunocompromised inmates into isolation, and access to basic information about testing for the virus. Instead, she baldly stated that there was "no sanitation problem" in the prisons and therefore "no health problem that would have caused the escape plan and these riots."

In reality, the imminent dangers facing inmates both before and during the coronavirus pandemic are well known to the state and the broader public. These dangers include severe overcrowding, with prisons

operating at 50 percent above capacity nationally, as well as a lack of access to food, clothing and basic hygiene items. Alarm at these conditions and the lack of safety measures implemented in the face of the spreading virus has been urgently raised for weeks by an array of organizations, including the prison guards' union, social advocacy groups and researchers throughout the country, with little to no effect on the actions of the government.

The National Imprisonment Movement (MNC), an advocacy organization comprised of current inmates, those previously incarcerated and retired prison guards, released a devastating communiqué on March 16, five days before the country-wide prison protests. The statement outlined the failure of Duque's government to follow through with promises to ramp up sanitation measures and provide prisoners with basic supplies.

The MNC charged that, far from any increase in sanitation, internal conditions "...remain in a state of collapse due to tuberculosis, flu, diarrhea...in this moment [prisoners] do not have access to masks, antibacterial soap, powdered soap, [disinfectants] or bleach to wash the grounds, halls, cells...in other words, the capacity of the state hardly reaches beyond suspending our right to receive visitors, increasing our confinement..." The MNC proposed measures to be immediately implemented by president Duque, including increasing conditional and administrative release of inmates.

A devastating portrait of conditions facing inmates during this crisis was also provided by Libardo Ariza, professor and researcher at the University of Los Andes in Bogota, in an article appearing in the Colombian news outlet *El Espectador* on March 22. Ariza stated that inmates in Colombia depend on family to supply the majority of their food, clothing and sanitary

products. He explained that the government's March 12 ban on family visits has effectively cut off a lifeline for inmates and is generating "higher levels of violence and panic."

Inmates at El Buen Pastor, a women's prison in Bogotá, told the news outlet that INPEC, Colombia's government agency responsible for incarceration, "has never been able to provide the basic hygiene needs we have, and as women it's worse." One inmate went on to describe how, as at other prisons, female inmates must get basic hygiene items from the outside, stating, "They're telling us that the key is to wash our hands with soap, but we don't have any. The way to get soap is [from the outside]."

Other inmates at the prison attested to the dire situation relating to the lack of food, which will likely make inmates more susceptible to the coronavirus. One stated, "Breakfast on Wednesday was boiled potatoes. No one eats well here and they don't even give us vitamin C." Another added, "Many people are weak and depressed. We accept they're not allowing family to enter, but give us food. We've cried in hunger."

El Espectador also reported that, as a measure to prepare for the spread of COVID-19, INPEC has separated children, including infants still breastfeeding, from their mothers in a section of the women's prison. The cruel measure, which is slated to last until April 20, leaves small children in the care of whichever family member is available to take care of them, a destabilizing and hazardous situation given that most family members work full time and there is no system in place allowing mothers to send breast milk outside of the prison.

Like their counterparts in Italy who launched a countrywide uprising in 27 prisons on March 9, inmates in Colombia were only able to draw international attention to their dire circumstances by launching direct, coordinated actions. The crowded, filthy and subhuman conditions, ignored for the most part in the mainstream press, are standard in prisons around the world, making them likely centers for the spread of the coronavirus. Preventing such an outcome requires urgent measures including an immediate and drastic reduction in crowding, the provision of proper sanitation and nutrition, and systematic testing and quarantine for those who may already have contracted the virus. To date, no such measures have been taken

by governments in any of the countries currently facing the existential threat of the pandemic.

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