

Rights Action  
February 16, 2012

## **Honduras – Over 350 Inmates Burned To Death In Over-Crowded “Comayagua” Prison**

Commentary by Grahame Russell

### **EMERGENCY RELIEF FUNDS NEEDED**

Rights Action is asking for tax-deductible donations that will be channeled to the CPTRT (Centre for Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims and their Families), a non-government organization in Honduras (that Rights Action has long worked with) that supports and works with prisoners and family members of prisoners in Honduras’ endemically abusive jail system.

**To donate, see below.**

### **QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS**

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February 16, 2012

## **HONDURAS – OVER 350 INMATES BURNED TO DEATH IN OVER-CROWDED “COMAYAGUA” PRISON**

(Commentary by Grahame Russell, Rights Action co-director)

The basic facts are brutal: Over 350 inmates were burned to death on Tuesday night/ Wednesday morning, February 14-15, in a huge fire at the Comayagua prison, located north of Tegucigalpa, about 15 minutes from the United States “Palmerola” military base. More are receiving medical treatment for burns and smoke inhalation.

More than 800 inmates had been crammed into this jail, built for less than half that amount. Most of the inmates killed were being detained without having even been formally charged with crimes, let alone been found guilty of any crime. Most were poor. Most died in their cells; prison authorities did not let them out.

For more information about this mass killing, read an MSNBC article (below) and watch today's <http://www.democracynow.org/> news report (minute 50:10) and go to: <http://www.aljazeera.com/>. Also, watch a 6 minute, hand-held camera, eye-witness viewing of the burning jail: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-g4GtqGaD40>. In most ways, this is an uneventful eye-witness account, and extremely sad. What is noteworthy, in this short film, is that the observers comment that they initially heard a huge explosion, that may well have started the fire; they keep on asking why it is taking so long for the fire department to come; and, through out the 6 minutes, one hears a significant amount of shooting – hand guns and heavy caliber guns.

While this mass killing is a “tragedy” in the most horrific human sense, it is actually a predictable result of Honduras’ increasing State repression, violence, corruption and impunity. While the root causes of Honduras’ current, dire situation go back generations, there is no doubt that repression, violence, corruption and impunity took a significant turn for the worse after the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the democratically elected government of President Zelaya.

In no small measure, the governments of the United States and Canada share responsibility for this state of affairs. The US and Canada, virtually isolated across the Americas, have worked the hardest to indirectly justify the June 2009 military coup, and then to politically legitimize and do business with the post-coup regime, constantly turning a blind eye to the ever worsening situation of repression, violence, corruption and impunity.

Even the mainstream media in North America (that since the 2009 coup has not properly investigated neither the violence, repression, corruption and impunity, nor the economic, military and political interests of the US and Canada in Honduras) has recently released a series of reports documenting how Honduras has become the ‘murder capital’ of the world, a ‘journalist killing’ capital of the world, an ‘LGBT killing’ capital of the world, ... and now a ‘jailed person killing capital’ of the world.

- New York Times:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/27/opinion/in-honduras-a-mess-helped-by-the-us.html>
- Miami Herald:  
<http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/01/24/2606175/central-americas-free-fire-zone.html>
- NPP radio, part 1:  
<http://www.npr.org/2012/02/11/146668852/in-honduras-police-accused-of-corruption-killings>, part 2:  
<http://www.npr.org/2012/02/12/146758628/whrhetorio-rules-in-honduras-a-coups-lasting-impact>

### **NOW WHAT?**

Over the next week, there will be an out-pouring of sympathy for the victims; an out-pouring of promises to fully investigate ..., to get to the bottom ..., to ensure that this never happens again ... , etc. Other governments and international institutions will make more promises to support penal reform ..., to provide training for guards and the judiciary ..., to support democratic institution building ..., etc. Rhetoric of sympathy and change aside, there will be no end to Honduras' awful situation until the "international community" – primarily the United States and Canada – put an end to business and politics as usual, ignoring the increasing violence, repression, corruption and impunity.

### **URGENTLY NEEDED ARE:**

Emergency relief funds for the work that the CPTRT is doing with victims of the fire and family members of the victims (see below) and on-going support for the National Popular Resistance Front that is at the forefront of the peaceful and courageous pro-democracy movement working to resist and denounce the violence, state repression, corruption and impunity, to restore and re-build their democracy, and to re-found their nation.

It is also urgent that North Americans keep on sending copies of this information, and their own letters, to their elected politicians and government officials and to their local media. 'Politics as usual' with the governments of the US and Canada, and 'business as usual' with North American investors and corporations (mining, tourism,

bananas, maquiladora sweat-shops, etc) all serve to legitimize and keep in power the undemocratic, military-backed regime in Honduras.

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TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS IN CANADA AND U.S.A.:**

Rights Action is asking for tax-deductible donations that will be channeled to our partner group in Honduras – CPTRT (Centre for Prevention, Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims and their Families). The CPTRT works with victims of torture, State repression and widespread societal violence. The CPTRT has long worked with prisoners and family members of prisoners in Honduras' endemically abusive jail system. Funds are being used to provide medical and food support, burial costs, emotional and legal support to the victims and their families and loved ones.

Make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

- UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
- CANADA: 552 - 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8  
(\* Write "CPTRT" on memo-line \*)

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[www.rightsaction.org](http://www.rightsaction.org)

- In Canada:  
<https://www.canadahelps.org/DonationDetails.aspx?cookieCheck=true>
- In USA:  
<https://npo.networkforgood.org/Donate/Donate.aspx?npoSubscriptionId=488>

DONATIONS OF STOCK can be made (anonymously):

[info@rightsaction.org](mailto:info@rightsaction.org)

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**REPORT: INMATES BURNED TO DEATH IN HORRIFIC  
HONDURAS PRISON FIRE WERE UNCONVICTED**

[http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/46413830/ns/world\\_news-americas/#](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/46413830/ns/world_news-americas/#)

[COMAYAGUA, Honduras](#) — Most of the prisoners burned alive by a fire at the Comayagua prison in Honduras that claimed 358 lives had never been charged or convicted, according to documents obtained by The Associated Press. More than half of the 856 inmates of the Comayagua farm prison north of the Central American country's capital were either awaiting trial or being held as suspected gang members, according to a report sent by the Honduran government this month to the United Nations.

A fire started by an inmate tore through the prison Tuesday night, burning and suffocating screaming men in their locked cells as rescuers desperately searched for keys. Officials confirmed 358 dead, making it the world's deadliest prison fire in a century. Survivors told horrific tales of climbing walls to break the sheet metal roofing and escape, only to see prisoners in other cell blocks being burned alive. Inmates were found stuck to the roofing, their bodies fused to the metal. "The corpses are charred and some of them are stuck on top of each other," said Johnny Ordenez, a Honduran soldier lugging the dead. "You have to peel them apart like an orange."

From the time firefighters received a call at 10:59 p.m. local time, the rescue was marred by human error and conditions that made the prison ripe for catastrophe. According to the report, obtained exclusively by the AP, on any given day there were about 800 inmates in a facility built for 500. There were only 51 guards by day and just 12 at night — the case at the time of the fire. The prison has no medical or mental health care and the budget allows less than \$1 per day per prisoner for food.

Prisoners only needed to bear a simple tattoo to be incarcerated under the strict Honduran anti-gang laws, the report said. The U.N. condemns the practice as a violation of international law.

National prison system director Danilo Orellana declined to comment on the supervision or the crowded conditions in Comayagua, a prison farm where inmates grew corn and beans. He referred an AP reporter to the commander of the prison police, who said comment would have to come from his public affairs office, which did not respond to

an AP request late Wednesday. President Porfirio Lobo on Wednesday suspended Orellana and other top prison officials.

Inside the prison, charred walls and debris showed the path of the fire, which burned through six barracks that had been crammed with 70 to 105 inmates each in four-level bunk beds. Bodies were found piled up in the bathrooms, where inmates apparently fled to the showers, hoping the water would save them from blistering flames. Prisoners perished clutching each other in bathtubs and curled up in laundry sinks. "It was something horrible," said survivor Eladio Chica, 40, as he was led away by police Wednesday night, handcuffed, to testify before a local court about what he saw. "I only saw flames, and when we got out, men were being burned, up against the bars, they were stuck to them."

#### THE DEADLY INFERNO NEVER HAD TO HAPPEN

The frantic inmate who started the fire gave warning, phoning the state governor and screaming he was going to burn the place down. After the man, who wasn't identified, lit a mattress on fire a few minutes later, crews said they rushed to the prison, arriving two minutes after a call for help because the firehouse was nearby. But the handful of guards held them out for a catastrophic 30 minutes, saying they thought the screams inside were a prison break and a riot. When rescuers finally were allowed in, they said they couldn't find keys or guards to unlock the barracks.

Fifteen minutes away, the U.S. military's Southern Command operates Joint Task Force Bravo, where major search and rescue teams and fire squads are on standby. They were never dispatched. Capt. Candace Allen, a spokeswoman for Joint Task Force Bravo, said they can only send what they're asked for, so throughout the night they sent surgical masks, flashlights and Glowsticks. No one asked for firefighters.

On Thursday morning, officials continued their investigation at the prison, where murals of Catholic saints, Jesus Christ and psalms stand out in an otherwise miserable place. Two palm trees flank the front entrance where a sign reads: "Let there be justice, even if the world perishes."

"Conditions at Comayagua? I'd have to say among the worst in Honduras," said Ron W. Nikkel, president of Prison Fellowship International who visited the facility in 2005. "It was very congested, there's not enough food, it's dangerous and dirty."

The U.S. State Department has criticized the Honduran government for harsh prison conditions, citing severe overcrowding, malnutrition, and lack of adequate sanitation. "The ready access of prisoners to weapons and other contraband, impunity for inmate attacks against nonviolent prisoners, inmate escapes, and threats by inmates and their associates outside prisons against prison officials and their families contributed to an unstable and dangerous penitentiary system environment," says the most recent State Department report on human rights in Honduras. "There were reports that prisoners were tortured or otherwise abused in, or on their way to, prisons and other detention facilities."

Human rights groups and the U.S. government also say inmates with mental illnesses, as well as those with tuberculosis and other infectious diseases, are routinely held among the general prison population.

Filmmaker Oscar Estrada, whose documentary "El Porvenir" focused on a 2003 Honduran prison riot, said the fire was one of several in recent years, including a 2004 blaze that killed more than 100 inmates. "When fires break out, they will not open gates to release prisoners and they die inside. It's happened before. They haven't learned because this is a collapsing country, they're not interested in making change," he said. [...]

The Associated Press and Reuters contributed to this report.

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