

Ecuador's interior minister quits over deadly prison riots



United Nations representatives had called for 'a prompt and impartial investigation' into the most recent deadly prison riot. [Photo: Vicente Gaibor del Pino/Reuters]

Quito, March 6 (RHC)--Ecuador's interior minister has resigned in the wake of simultaneous riots in four prisons that left 79 people dead. "It is my own personal decision to submit my irrevocable resignation as minister," Patricio Pazmino said in a letter to President Lenin Moreno, which was made public on Twitter on Friday.

Pazmino, a reserve police officer, said his "management at the head of the ministry has been questioned", without giving further details. On Monday, the National Assembly called for the removal of Pazmino, as well as the head of the police and the prison service. Pazmino's resignation came a week after the riots, which Moreno called an outbreak of "barbarism."

Authorities said the riots were triggered by clashes between rival criminal gangs vying for power and which are allegedly linked to Mexican and Colombian cartels. Pazmino said he was also resigning for health reasons, saying he had been diagnosed for a second time with COVID-19. He said this added complications to a serious disease, which he did not identify but he said exposed him "to an enormous risk and the impossibility of continuing" in office.

Pazmino came to office last November after the removal of then-minister Maria Paula Romo over the use of expired tear gas canisters during violent protests in October 2019.

The president had declared a state of emergency in Ecuador's prison system in 2019 after at least 24 were killed in a wave of incidents. According to the office of Ecuador's human rights ombudsman, 103 inmates were killed in prisons in 2020.

United Nations representatives had called for "a prompt and impartial investigation" into the most recent deadly prison riot. The prisons' maximum-security areas primarily house inmates linked to killings, drug trafficking, extortion and other serious crimes.

In order to reduce prisoner numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government commuted the sentences of people convicted of minor offences to reduce overcrowding.

But Ecuador's prison system, whose facilities were designed for some 27,000 inmates, still houses about 38,000 people despite the reduction.

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