

Prison crisis continues in Ecuador

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By María Josefina Arce

Ecuador has been experiencing new violent events in its prisons for days. The last one took place in the Penitenciaría del Litoral, in the coastal city of Guayaquil, where several detainees were killed and others were injured.

This event was preceded by another of the same nature in the province of Cotopaxi, south of Quito, the capital, which also left several dead and wounded.

Since 2021 the country has been shaken by several massacres in prisons. Some 400 inmates have been killed, in what the government of President Guillermo Lasso attributes to a war between members of criminal gangs, whose incarceration he wants to present as a success in the fight against drug trafficking.

However, experts recall that 70% of those killed had not been sentenced, many were under provisional imprisonment, and 39% were incarcerated for minor crimes.

When Lasso took office he said he wanted to put an end to this violence, but so far there are no concrete results, and Ecuador is still immersed in a prison crisis, which has been brewing for years and has worsened in recent times.

During the previous government, presided by Lenín Moreno, there were also violent events that left several dead. The response was declarations of emergency and an iron fist.

Overcrowding, lack of budget, absence of rehabilitation programs and lack of or poorly trained prison staff is a reality in these prisons, where the government has been unable to control the situation.

International organizations have called on the authorities to guarantee dignified conditions for prisoners and a crime prevention policy in which incarceration is not the main resource.

The UN Subcommittee for the Prevention of Torture warned about the critical situation of the penitentiary system in Ecuador, and pointed out that the prisons lack essential services and basic resources.

For many citizens, it is essential to invest in social programs to combat poverty and precarious employment, and thus reduce the possibility that young people will be recruited by criminal gangs and see this as an alternative to survive and help their families.

The prison crisis in Ecuador is an old problem, which cannot be associated only to the proliferation of criminal gangs, but also to the increase of inequalities, the absence of social policies to reduce inequality and improve living conditions.

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