

Death toll from two prison riots in Ecuador climbs to 22

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Soldiers guard the entrance to the Sierra Centro Norte prison in Special Police units deployed to the jails in southern Guayas province and Cotopaxi province, south of Quito, the capitol, to quell the violence, the government said [Rodrigo Buendia/AFP]

Quito, July 23 (RHC)-- At least 22 inmates have been killed and several police injured during riots at two of Ecuador's largest jails, the Andean nation said, marking the second big deadly wave of prison violence this year.

Special police units were sent to the jails in southern Guayas province and Cotopaxi province, south of Quito, the capital, to quell the violence, the government said on Thursday.

"I want to say to the mafias that seek to threaten this country that they're mistaken if they think this government will act with the same weakness as the previous ones," President Guillermo Lasso said in a speech in the city of Latacunga.

Lasso, who was sworn in as president in May, declared a state of emergency in the country's jail system. At least 50 people were injured, including some police officers.

The elite forces managed to regain control of the two prisons on Wednesday, the SNAI prisons management body said in a statement. At least 13 inmates died at the Cotopaxi prison and 35 prisoners and six police officers were injured, according to an updated toll on Thursday.

Police and soldiers prevented a planned escape from the facility by 31 inmates. At the Guayas prison, at least eight inmates lost their lives in the violence and three police were injured, SNAI said. Interior Minister Alexandra Vela said 78 prisoners had been recaptured.

In February, at least 79 inmates died at three prisons – also including Guayas and Cotopaxi – in clashes between rival gangs. Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city, is in Guayas. In those riots, inmates were decapitated and burned in violence that exposed the power of prison gangs and shocked the country.

Ecuador's prison system has about 60 facilities designed for 29,000 inmates but is burdened by overcrowding and staffing shortages. About 38,000 detainees are watched over by 1,500 guards, a shortfall of some 2,500, according to experts.

Ecuador's human rights ombudsman says there were 103 killings in Ecuador's prisons in 2020. In an attempt to counter the violence, then-President Lenin Moreno declared a state of emergency several times, including for three months last year. Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, Ecuador has used alternative sentences for minor offences. The initiative has reduced overcrowding in prisons from 42 percent to 30 percent.

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