

# *At least 18 prisoners dead in Honduras jail riot*

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Tegucigalpa, December 23 (RHC)-- At least 18 inmates were killed and 16 injured in an overnight fighting between prisoners in Honduras' northern port town of Tela, prison officials said over the weekend. The National Penitentiary Institute said 17 prisoners had died at the facility in Tela, about 200 kilometres (120 miles) from the capital Tegucigalpa, and one more died in hospital, with local media describing the unrest as gang violence.

A prison spokesperson, Digna Aguilar, said authorities had to enter the area carefully "for fear of being among the victims" because several inmates had firearms, which slowed the investigation. The combined national security force known as Fusina said that five 9 millimetre guns, as well as ammunition, had been seized from the inmates.

Prison officials had originally reported only three deaths, but the toll quickly rose. Forensic workers placed the bodies in plastic bags and transported them to the judicial morgue of San Pedro Sula to be autopsied. An AFP photographer at the scene saw shocked relatives arriving to claim the bodies.

Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez, grappling with a recent wave of prison killings, on Tuesday ordered the army and the police to take full control of the country's 27 prisons, which are badly overcrowded with some 21,000 inmates.

Honduras has been plagued by drug trafficking, gangs, poverty and corruption. It suffers from one of the highest murder rates in the world outside areas of armed conflict, having registered 41.2 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2018.

President Hernandez created a military police force financed by a new tax, and built special prisons for gang members to tackle the problem. The high crime rate has been a key factor behind a wave of migration toward the United States, particularly by children who say they fear being forced into gangs.

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