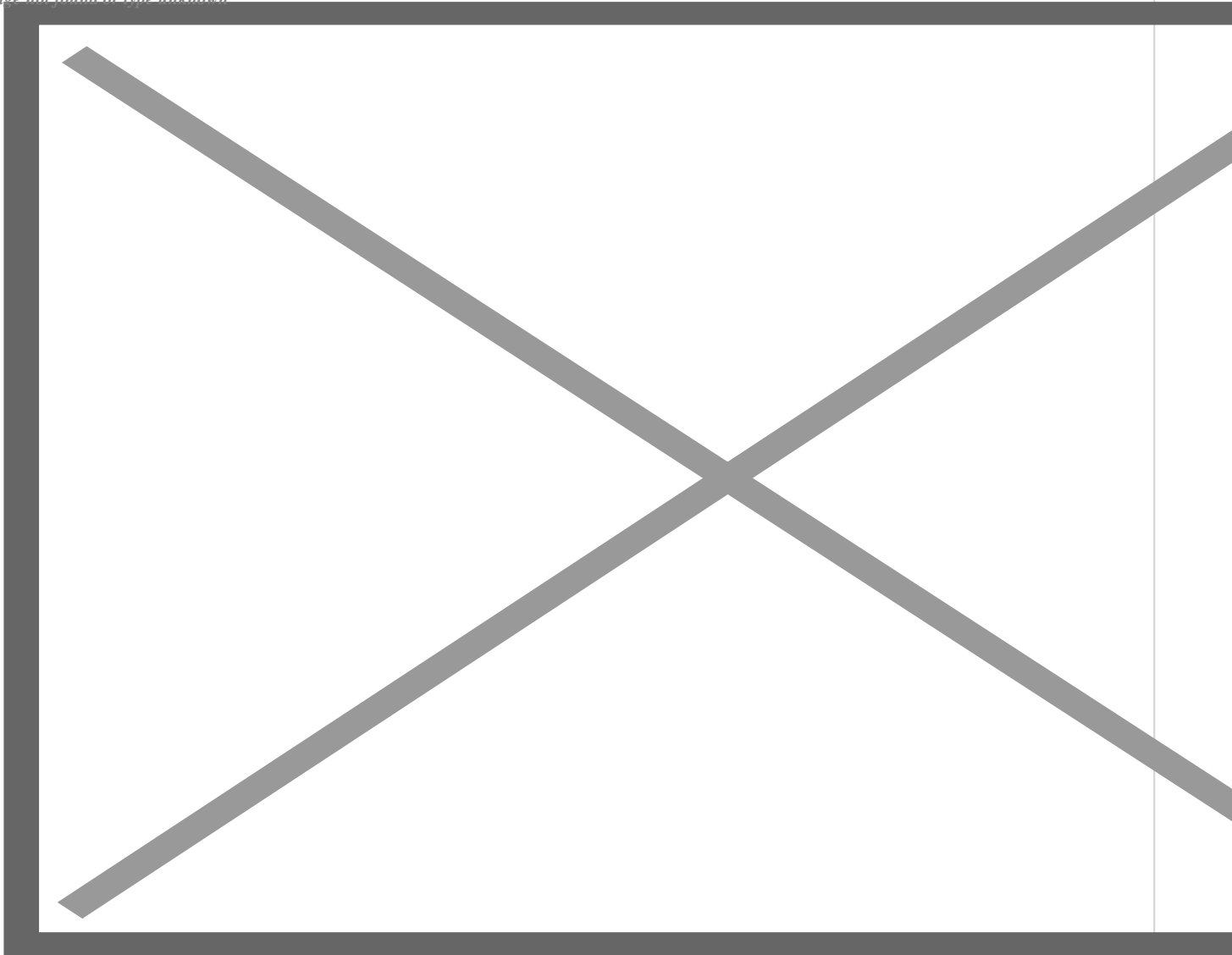


Several inmates beheaded in gang violence at Guatemala prison

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Police officers transport the corpse of an inmate after a 'riot' at the Cantel men's prison in Quetzaltenango in western Guatemala. [File: Alexis Morales/AFP]

Guatemala City, May 20 (RHC)-- At least seven inmates have been killed, most of them beheaded, in clashes between rival gangs at a prison in western Guatemala, according to officials. Hundreds of police

have been deployed to restore order at the Cantel Prison, which houses inmates from both the Mara Salvatrucha gang and their sworn enemies, the Barrio 18, following the violence on Wednesday.

“Preliminarily, the death of seven inmates is known,” the Ministry of the Interior said in a statement, describing the situation as a “riot.” He corrected an earlier figure of 14 deaths, which apparently was not correct.

A spokesman for the National Civil Police (PNC), Jorge Aguilar, earlier told the AFP news agency that the violence was caused by a confrontation between two gangs, and that at least six prisoners had been beheaded.

Authorities suspect one of the gangs attacked the other in retaliation for an incident that took place several days ago, Aguilar added. Gang violence and riots are common at the Cantel Prison, which has been condemned by human rights groups for its grim conditions.

Built to house five hundred inmates, it is currently home to over four times that number, police said. Guatemala’s feared and violent gangs are known for their extortion rackets, in which they force businesspeople and bus operators to pay them protection money or face execution.

Gangs are responsible for nearly half of the 3,500 violent deaths a year in Guatemala, authorities have said -- one of the highest violent death rates in the world.

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