

Ecuador prison riot at Guayas 1 is latest violence in deadly week

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Soldiers guard the premises of the Guayas 1 prison during an operative to control a riot in Guayaquil, Ecuador. [Gerardo Menoscal/AFP]

Quito, November 4 (RHC)-- At least six police officers have been wounded during a prison riot in Ecuador, the latest incident during a deadly week in the Latin American country, which has seen a recent uptick in violence blamed on feuding drug gangs.

Police said the riot occurred at the Guayas 1 prison in the southwestern port city Guayaquil on Thursday, a facility that has become notorious for deadly gang violence. A source at the SNAI prison authority told

the AFP news agency that the police officers were confronted by inmates with guns and explosives.

On Wednesday, clashes at the prison left two inmates dead and six wounded. That came a day after a string of deadly attacks in the cities of Guayaquil and Duran in the Guayas province and in Esmeraldas further north left five police officers and one civilian dead. The attacks, which targeted 18 sites, were believed to be in response to a plan to transfer about 1,000 prisoners from Guayas 1 to other facilities.

The violence underscored the devolving security situation in parts of the country, once considered a relatively peaceful neighbour of major cocaine producers Colombia and Peru. In recent years, Ecuador has shifted from an important drug transit route to a distribution centre in its own right.

President Guillermo Lasso has repeatedly accused drug gangs of using violence – including inside prisons – to retaliate against his government’s efforts to combat the drug trade. The murder rate in Ecuador nearly doubled in 2021 to 14 per 100,000 inhabitants, and reached 18 per 100,000 between January and October of 2022, according to official data.

Prison violence has also soared since late 2020, with at least 400 people killed while in detention, many beheaded or burned. The violence has been compounded by corruption among prison guards that facilitates access to guns and explosives.

Last month, a panel of United Nations experts raised “grave” concerns about the deadly prison violence in Ecuador, blaming the bloodshed on systemic issues including a lack of rehabilitation programmes for inmates and shortages of trained prison staff.

“The recent violence is the consequence of decades of state abandonment,” said Maria Luisa Romero, who led a delegation from the United Nations’s Subcommittee for the Prevention of Torture to Ecuador between September 25 and October 1.

On Tuesday, Lasso declared a 45-day state of emergency and nightly curfew in Guayas and Esmeraldas. Defense minister Luis Lara told reporters that more than 1,400 soldiers were helping police in Guayaquil and Esmeraldas. A series of operations led to the arrest of at least 36 people allegedly connected to Tuesday’s attacks, authorities said.

Also on Tuesday, prisoners at a facility in Esmeraldas took hostage eight guards to protest the inmate transfer, but later freed them. On Monday, two headless bodies were found hanging from a pedestrian bridge in the city.

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