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How many more must die before the situation of Venezuelan prisons is addressed?

After yet another slaughter in a Venezuelan prison, this time in the Maracaibo National Prison, known as Sabaneta prison, Amnesty International urges the Venezuelan authorities to prioritize and address the problem of overcrowding and violence in prisons.

According to media reports, later confirmed by the authorities, on 16 and 17 September inmates at Maracaibo prison in Zulia state clashed using firearms and explosives killing 16 detainees and leaving five wounded. According to information provided by local human rights organization, the Venezuelan Observatory of Prisons (Observatorio Venezolano de Prisiones), the prison has capacity for 700 people, but is currently home to nearly 3,700. The same organization has calculated that so far this year, 69 detainees have died in Sabaneta prison as a result of violence, while 289 people have died in prisons nationwide in the first semester of 2013.

These figures show once again the crisis in Venezuelan prisons and the situation of overcrowding and violence experienced by many detainees. It is unacceptable that in Venezuelan prisons some detainees have such easy access to firearms and pose such a grave danger to fellow inmates.

In July 2011, the government established the Ministry of Prison Services to find a solution to the problem, which ranges from chronic overcrowding and lack of access to adequate medical care, to long delays in the administration of justice and the lack of an independent prison inspection system.

Amnesty International repeats its call to the Venezuelan authorities, particularly the Ministry of Prison Services, to take urgent action to address this serious situation. It is essential to implement measures to resolve the overcrowding through the provision of infrastructure and services to cover needs in line with international standards such as the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, and ensure that prisoners live in dignity and that their safety and physical integrity are preserved.

It is also urgent to take concrete measures to prevent and sanction violence between inmates and put an end to the possession of firearms and explosives. The authorities should ensure that there is sufficient and properly trained prison staff and investigate and punish those responsible for smuggling weapons into prisons.