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Today: partly sunny, humid; thunderstorms, night 88. Tonight: a thunderstorm, low 69. Tomorrow: partly sunny, a thunderstorm, south, high 88. Weather map on Page A15.

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All the News
That's Fit to Print

Report Paints Dire Picture In Honduran Prison Fire

By KARLA ZABLUDOVSKY

MEXICO CITY — The fire that killed 362 people in a Honduran prison last year started accidentally in an upper bunk in one cell and rapidly spread through locked gates and past frightened police guards, according to a report released Friday by the Organization of American States.

The Honduran authorities had known about the high risk of fire since at least 2004, the report said, citing two inspection briefs from the city fire department, which had recommended installing portable extinguishers and had noted the presence of warm electrical lines.

“The administration of the prisons in Honduras currently suffers from severe structural deficiencies which have led to its collapse,” the report said, pointing to major challenges of systemic overcrowding, deplorable health conditions, untrained prison staff members, the delegation of internal control to prisoners and an insufficient budget.

It urged the Honduran authorities to conduct a diligent investigation into the Feb. 14 nighttime blaze, one of the worst in Latin America in recent years.

“It is a challenge,” said Santos Simeón Flores, the director of the newly established Penitentiary Institute. “I have kneeled before God to ask for his help.”

The report compiled harrowing accounts from the authorities and survivors. The fire department waited for a guard to open the gate while the police fired at prisoners trying to escape the flames through the ceilings of burning cells. An inmate who served as a nurse and coaxed a custodian to hand over the keys to the cells went around opening them one by one.

Abundant flammable material inside cells — including blankets and nylon curtains — and the absence of an emergency plan aggravated the disaster, the report said. It added that prison guards had not had radios to communicate among themselves.

A new penitentiary law took effect in Honduras in December, establishing a framework for prison operations, creating an autonomous institution responsible for administering the prison system and requiring training for prison staff members.

But analysts in Honduras say, the law has no budget and is therefore bound to fail, making more tragedies inevitable.

“There is a double discourse at the highest levels of authority, the usual hypocrisy,” said Odalis Nájera, the commissioner of the National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture.

Encumbered by feeble judicial institutions, rampant corruption and gang-related violence, Honduras also has the highest murder rate in the world, according to a 2011 United Nations report. Its police force, partially financed by the American State Department, has been battered by a string of scandals that culminated in the temporary suspension of 1,400 investigators in June.

Similarly weakened, the country’s penitentiary system has long been condemned by human rights groups.

Fires in Honduran prisons are common. In July 2012, inmates set fire to the juvenile detention center in the valley of Tamara, killing one person and wounding several others. Earlier that year, prisoners at the National Penitentiary in San Pedro Sula started a fire during a riot. In 2004, a fire killed 107 inmates in San Pedro Sula.

In all, 756 people died inside the country’s prisons from all causes between 2006 and 2012. Three years ago, the government issued an emergency decree for 9 of the country’s 24 prisons, which are now housing about 4,000 inmates above the official capacity.

But the prison fire that gave rise to the report, in the city of Comayagua, stood out in the region. At the time of the fire, about 850 inmates were in the prison, which was designed to hold between 300 and 350. Among the dead was a woman who was at the prison on a conjugal visit.

Half of the prison cells were reduced to scorched walls, and most of them have not been rehabilitated. “The most significant things that had been done to the prison structure at the time of the visit,” the report says, “was that a roof had been installed over cell No. 10.”

Survivors of the fire have been forced to live in cell No. 10, a “degrading treatment that is contrary to human dignity,” the report said.

“Honduras has lost its sense of shame,” said Luis Fernando Reyes, the penitentiary audits coordinator for the Supreme Court. “No matter how often international organizations slap us in the face, the government does not respond.”

