Report Paints Dire Picture In Honduran Prison Fire

BY KARLA TABUDOVSKY

MEXICO CITY — The fire that killed 366 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 in their prisons for at least 204, 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 prison 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, overcrowded prisons, staff members, the obligation of prison control to prisoners, and insufficient budgets.

It urged the Honduran authorities to conduct a diligent investigation into the Feb. 1 fire, which claimed one of the worst in Latin America in recent years.

"It is a challenge," said Santos Sosa, director of the newly established Penitentiary Institute, "I have learned before God to seek 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 fixed at prisoners trying to escape the flames through the ceilings of burning cells. An inmate who served as a nurse and cooked a custom meal was ordered to leave the keys to the exits, then ordered to pass them on by one.

Abundant flammable material inside cells — including burlap and nylons and cardboard — and the absence of an emergency plan aggravated the disaster, the report said. It added that prison guards had not had radical to communicate among themselves.

A new penitentiary law took effect in Honduras in December, establishing a framework for prison operations, creating an authority, and establishing the necessary conditions for prison administration.

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 audit coordinator for the Supreme Court. "We cannot allow such international organizations to help us in the face, the government does not respond."