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Deadly gang riot in Mexican prison; 49 dead amid clashes and flames

By **Brian Murphy** February 11

A clash between rival factions in a Mexican prison touched off a deadly riot and mattress-fed fires Thursday, leaving at least 49 inmates dead after one of the worst outbreaks of violence in a system plagued by overcrowding and corruption.

The melee at the Topo Chico prison in the northern city of Monterrey was another blow to authorities seeking to tackle problems that include gang control in many of Mexico's largest penitentiaries.

It also comes less than a week before Pope Francis is scheduled to visit a prison in the border city of Ciudad Juarez, a former epicenter for battles between Mexico's powerful drug networks.

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Jaime Rodríguez, the governor of Nuevo Leon state, of which Monterrey is the capital, told reporters that the prison fight involved a faction linked to the Zetas drug cartel.

Rodríguez had initially said at least 52 inmates were killed and 12 were injured, including some burned in cellblock blazes as mattresses and furniture were set aflame, but later reduced the number of dead to 49.

Outside the prison, worried relatives rattled the gates and chain-link fences demanding to be let into the compound. At one point, family members forced open an entrance and pelted riot police with wood and stones, television reports showed.

Images on social media purported to show bodies of inmates scattered across a prison courtyard. The prison has separate areas for female and elderly inmates, but they were calm, Rodríguez said after the unrest was brought under control.

The death toll was the highest from prison violence in years in Mexico. In 2012, 44 inmates died in a prison bloodbath between rival drug gang members in the Monterrey suburb of Apodaca.

A report the following year by Mexico's National Human Rights Commission found that 65 of 101 prisons surveyed were effectively run by inmates. Other rights activists have documented chronic overcrowding in many Mexican jails.

Shortcomings in prison security were highlighted by an elaborate tunnel used by drug lord Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán to escape in July from his cell in the Altiplano federal maximum-security prison about 50 miles west of Mexico City. He was recaptured last month shortly after giving an interview to actor Sean Penn for an article that appeared in Rolling Stone magazine.

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Brian Murphy joined the Post after more than 20 years as a foreign correspondent and bureau chief for the Associated Press in Europe and the Middle East. He has reported from more than 50 countries and has written three books.
