

## Latin America

14 prisoners remain hospitalized

# Chile's worst prison fire kills 83 inmates, Piñera arrives on site



Fire engulfed a prison in the Chilean capital early in the morning, killing 83 inmates and critically injuring 14 others, the government said, in the worst-ever accident in the country's jail system.

Officials said the fire was deliberately started during an early-morning fight between inmates in one of the crowded prison's five towers. Television footage showed part of the San Miguel prison in flames, with black smoke billowing from the building.

Frantic relatives of the inmates flooded to the jail's walls, screaming and imploring police to let them in to rescue their loved ones. Officials afterward began informing the families of those killed.

"It is exasperating not to know if they are alive or dead. We have been here for hours, and they haven't told us anything!" said one woman called Maria, declining to give her surname.

Some relatives screamed when officials read out lists of some prisoners who had survived the blaze, assuming those not included were dead. Officials stressed the lists were only partial. Some relatives threw rocks and glass bottles and scuffled with police in frustration.

"It is a hugely painful tragedy," President Sebastian Piñera said, confirming the death toll had risen to 83.

"We cannot guarantee the number of dead will not rise."

"We cannot keep living with a prison system which is absolutely inhumane," he added, citing chronic overcrowding in the country's jails. "We are going to speed up the process to ensure our country has a humane, dignified prison system that befits a civilized country."

Piñera said it was the third worst fire Chile has ever suffered.

It is also the latest in a string of disasters and accidents to hit Chile this year, including a devastating February earthquake and ensuing tsunamis and a mine collapse that ultimately saw a happy ending when 33 miners were rescued after two months below ground.

Justice Minister Felipe Bulnes said the prison housed 1,960 inmates, nearly twice the 1,100 inmate capacity.

Radio station Bio Bio reported that around 200 inmates had to be evacuated into a jail yard due to the fire, which a local state prosecutor said was started deliberately.

Anxious relatives climbed onto the prison fence, shouting out inmates' names at the burning building. Some prisoners waved their arms and T-shirts through prison window bars.

Families heard about the fire and headed to the walls of the prison just south of Santiago. Wednesday is visiting day, which meant many families had already planned to head to the prison.

"Rusio Victor, wave a white T-shirt Daddy," shouted 7-year-old Yadira Lopez, appealing to her father to signal he was alive. For some, there was relief.

Gonzalo Sepulveda wept after managing to contact his brother Cristian.

"I'll die if something happens to him," Sepulveda said.

"Those aren't animals they have in there. They are human beings who have made mistakes."