

# Colombian Prison Hell

## Made in the USA

*By James Jordan*

The Campaign for Labor Rights is very concerned about reports we have been receiving from Colombia's La Tramacua Penitentiary in Valledupar, department of César. Conditions there are deplorable, and they got that way with the collusion and collaboration of the United States government. The US Federal Bureau of Prisons acts as a consultant to Colombia's network of maximum security prisons. Among these, the prison at Valledupar -- La Tramacua -- has earned particular distinction and infamy for its harsh and inhumane conditions. The US Federal Bureau of Prisons not only acts as an



*Construction of La Tramacua Prison was overseen by the Federal Bureau of Prisons of the United States.*

advisor for La Tramacua, but also has overseen construction there.

How are conditions at La Tramacua? Writing in Colombia's El Mundo—a corporate, daily newspaper out of Medellín, Tatiana Cárdenas reported on August 13, 2009 that: “The inmates lack the minimum sanitary

conditions; there is no water, the place is constantly surrounded with excrement from the same prisoners who, not having sanitary services to use, throw bags [of their waste] outside the prison and the lower floors.

In order to have water for drinking, bathing, washing clothes and the activities that require it, the inmates resort to filling containers and carrying them away tied to belts, this procedure done during the 10 minutes in which water arrives at the jail, although due to the low pressure on the upper floors, they do not have the opportunity to stock up the supply. At the beginning of this year, one convict died in an accident carrying the water.

‘The smell you sense from before arriving is a stench that makes one feel sick. The flies are everywhere and the heat is unbearable,’ remembers Catalina [recalling a visit to her husband, an inmate at La Tramacua]....

The same as the men, they [the women prisoners] suffer the greater part of the day lying on the floor, since the cement benches are not sufficient for all, trying to negotiate an inclement temperature of 37 degree Centigrade [98.6 Fahrenheit], without water most of the time....”

In September, the Campaign for Labor Rights received an alert from the women political prisoners of

La Tramacua, telling how in desperation over prison conditions, the prisoner Alexandra Correa had hanged herself. Correa had been held in solitary confinement for 19 months, separated from her companion and partner, Tatiana Pinzon. Both she and Alexandra had threatened to kill themselves. The Human Rights Representative, Esmeralda Echeverry, reported the women's suicide threats to Colombia's Director for the National Institute of Penitentiaries and Jails (INPEC by its Spanish initials), Dr. Teresa Moya Suta, who responded, "Let her kill herself -- I will assume responsibility". Two days later, Correa did.

The week after, Col. Carlos Alberto Barraga, the second in charge of INPEC, visited Pinzon in prison, where she fell to her knees, begging to be taken from Valledupar. Barraga laughed in her face. Since then, because of public pressure, Pinzon has been moved to a prison closer to her family. However, Echeverry, who went public about these events in order to apply that pressure, was subsequently fired from her position. The current Human Rights Representative for the women prisoners has been threatened not to make public declarations about the penitentiary.

The women prisoners represent only about one per cent of the population at La Tramacua, but receive no consideration or treatment specific to their status as women. The Ninth Tower, where the women are jailed, was built to confine Anayibe "Sonia" Rojas, the FARC leader who was extradited to the United States and is now serving time in a US prison. In order to justify jailing her in a men's prison, women were, without warning, rounded up in the early hours of the morning and brought to La Tramacua from across Colombia, without respect to what their sentences were for, nor even if they had yet been convicted of a crime. Women being held for violent crimes are held side by side with women awaiting trial, who, in many cases, do not even know for what they have been charged.

The conditions at La Tramacua are another reminder to those of us in the United States that repression and war in Colombia are sponsored by the US government, from Bureau of Prisons oversight and advice for abusive prisons like La Tramacua to the billions of dollars given to the Colombian military and plans for the US to take over seven bases there.

We are asking friends and supporters of the Campaign for Labor Rights to call and email their Representatives in Congress to demand:

- \* an investigation into the role the US Federal Bureau of Prisons has played as an advisor to La Tramacua and all Colombia's maximum security prisons;
- \* her or his personal intervention with both the US Bureau of Prisons and the Colombian government to call for an end to the deplorable conditions at La Tramacua and to demand immediate prisoner access to potable water and to sanitary toilets throughout the day;
- \* her or his personal intervention to demand an end to the harassment and threats toward the prisoners' Human Rights Representatives.

Your representative may not know anything about conditions at La Tramacua. We suggest that, in addition to making the above demands, that you send them this article. Please let CLR know about your contacts with members of Congress by emailing [James@AFGJ.org](mailto:James@AFGJ.org).