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AMERICA/CHILE - Bishops renew proposal to urgently establish "a table for dialogue at the highest level to resolve the issue of Chilean prisons"

Concepción (Agenzia Fides) - The President of the Episcopal Conference of Chile, Archbishop Ricardo Ezzati Andrello, sdb, of Concepción, issued a public statement about the tragedy at San Miguel prison which resulted in the deaths of 81 detainees and many wounded. Archbishop Ezzati asked to establish a table for dialogue at the highest level to resolve the serious problems of prisons in the Country. The statement was read during the Mass for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, in the presence of thousands of the faithful who filled the Marian Sanctuary in Concepción.

"We Bishops stated this clearly last July, when we presented our proposal for a pardon because of the Bicentennial. We asked on that occasion, for a joint effort from all sectors for a more humane criminal justice and prison system. It was the request of the Standing Committee in the message delivered to the President of the Republic," says the text of the statement, and continues: "Many prisons do not offer solid opportunities for the rehabilitation of inmates. On the contrary, people often become more violent and dehumanized than those who have facilitated the development of the crime."

"We believe that the Country should clearly know the causes of this tragedy and the humiliating conditions in which many prisoners live. We hopefully await the realization of the announcements made a month ago by the Ministry of Justice, in order to significantly improve the state of life in prison. It is not too late to welcome the fundamental objective of our proposal. In this way, society's protagonists can enter into a high-level dialogue to resolve the drama of prisons in Chile, as was done with the issues of education and work, or as has been done recently to improve public health. The reality of prisons in Chile must be on the agenda for decisions and this is urgent," said the statement.

With regard to the tragedy, the Justice Minister, Felipe Bulnes, who was present in the prison of San Miguel a few hours after the tragedy, said: "The conditions in prisons undermine the fundamental dignity of human rights. We have a situation of overcrowding in the order of 70% nationally; where there is room for 100 prisoners, there are 170 people and this is a serious situation." The President of the Progressive Party (PRO), said: "The situation is very critical. It is the dark and evil face of our democracy. Prisons are real "tombs of sub-humanity". Somehow we have more deaths in prisons than in countries that have the death penalty," said former presidential candidate.

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