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Ghana: What's happening in the prisons?

During a recent visit to Ghana in March 2008, the Ghanaian government refused Amnesty International's request to visit Ghanaian prisons. Amnesty International delegation followed the procedure and requested authorization one month prior to their visit. Upon arrival, the delegates were informed they could not visit Nsawam prison as requested, according to the Minister of Interior Mr Kwamena Bartels, due to "internal difficulties".

Amnesty International has received reports from Ghanaian civil society organizations that the prisons generally are under resourced; there are poor medical and sanitary facilities and not enough beds or bedding. As cells are extremely overcrowded, many people sleep on the bare floor and inmates are forced to sleep at turns. Amnesty International observes that Nsawam Medium Security Prison, a prison forty kilometers outside Accra and built for 800 inmates, currently incarcerates approximately 2,700 prisoners. Those prisoners, who are on remand, face long delays before they are tried; in some cases they are reportedly "forgotten". Access to justice appears to be a serious problem.

Amnesty International also received reports suggesting that the police fail to bring suspects before a court within 48 hours after arrest, as guaranteed by the Ghanaian Constitution. Rather than bringing suspects before a court of law, some police officers sign remand warrants themselves and take suspects to prisons directly.

Amnesty International is worried the government is not being transparent regarding the situation in the prisons. Only few organizations appear to have access to Ghana's prisons and even those with access experience at times difficulties to visit the prisons.

Amnesty International is alarmed that the government decided not to allow the organization to visit the prison, despite the fact that the fulfillment of Ghana's human rights obligations will be reviewed in May 2008 under the Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations.

Amnesty International calls on the Ghanaian government to implement the reforms needed in the Ghanaian criminal justice system.

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INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT, 1 EASTON STREET, LONDON WC1X 0DW, UNITED KINGDOM

According to official figures, Ghanaian prisons incarcerate approximately 13,000 people, while there is capacity for approximately 8,000 prisoners. Almost one third of the detainees are awaiting trial. There are 104 prisoners on death row, including three women. Almost 260 prisoners are serving a life sentence. In the same year, 118 prisoners died; almost 25 percent of HIV/AIDS.

Around 330 judges and magistrates work in Ghanaian courts. Most courts do not have the resources for computers. Few judges visit the prisons, because their workload is very high: in 2006 for example, they handled more 22,200 cases; over 8,800 prisoners were convicted and approximately 13,400 were remanded to prison. The Ministry of Justice and judiciary started the 'Justice for all Programme' to speed up the trials of those remanded in prison by allowing the Court to sit in prison and review cases.