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## **Ghana: Improve infrastructure, reduce overcrowding and increase prison monitoring to meet international prison standards**

Ghana's prisons are rundown, overcrowded and in need of urgent reform with prisoners –facing conditions which do not meet international standards, Amnesty International said today in a new report "Prisoners are bottom of the pile": Human rights of inmates in Ghana.

Based on research carried out by Amnesty International in 2011, the report documents the problems of overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure and sanitation, insufficient food and health problems in prisons in Ghana.

Prison overcrowding is acute in some prisons and requires urgent attention by the government. Approximately 3000 inmates are awaiting trial and have not been convicted of a crime.

"It is unacceptable to lock up prisoners for 12 hours a day, 365 days a year in cells intended to hold a half, a third or a quarter of the numbers actually squeezed into dark, poorly ventilated and unhygienic spaces," said James Welsh, Amnesty International's researcher on health and detention.

While some prisoners have beds, others are forced to sleep on the floor. In some particularly crowded cells, prisoners showed Amnesty International how they sleep on their sides, in lines, covering the entire floor space.

Hygiene is compromised by the crowding and poor sanitation.

One remand prisoner told Amnesty International: "Our cell – the place where we sleep -- is where we urinate and go to the toilet. You don't get any privacy. You have to use the bucket."

Prisoners complained of health problems such as skin diseases and the difficulties of obtaining prompt treatment from the infirmaries which were overloaded and under-equipped.

Both staff and prisoners complained about the inadequate budget for food for prisoners.

"The recent government decision to increase spending on food for prisoners -- from 0.60 to 1.80 cedi per day per prisoner -- is a welcome step, but more measures to improve standards are needed," said James Welsh.

Prisoners under sentence of death are held in separate accommodation within a small number of prisons. For male prisoners, accommodation is overcrowded and activities are not permitted, while the four women held under sentence of death complained of isolation as they are not allowed to mix with other inmates.

The current constitutional review process gives the government an opportunity to end the death penalty

and to rationalize the situation of the 138 prisoners currently under sentence of death.

"To bring prisons into line with Ghana's treaty obligations will require political commitment and action by the government -- it is urgently needed," said James Welsh.

"Overcrowding could be reduced by wider use of non-custodial sentences such as fines and community service though fines must be set at realistic levels. The transfer of prisoners to the new Ankaful prison will reduce, but not end, overcrowding."

One key goal of prison is rehabilitation -- a process ensuring that prisoners return to society as reformed citizens.

"There are training schemes within the prison system but these are undercut by the poor conditions, the limited range of activities for prisoners and the shortage of resources," said James Welsh.

A key to prison reform is regular monitoring and accountability. It is important that prisoners are able to talk to independent agencies and regulators -- lawyers, diplomats, human rights monitors -- and break out of the isolation in which they are kept.

Some prisoners told Amnesty International that they had never spoken to anyone without guards being present.

"Both prison staff and prisoners would benefit in the long run from greater openness," said James Welsh.

"The Prisons Service was very helpful in facilitating Amnesty International's research," said Lawrence Amesu, director of Amnesty International Ghana and one of the report authors.

"We believe that this cooperative spirit will offer a basis for continuing dialogue on human rights in prisons."

Note to editors:

For this report Amnesty International delegates interviewed some 80 prisoners, both remand prisoners (those awaiting trial) and convicted prisoners. Most were interviewed in depth in private though some general discussions with prisoners took place in cells or in prison yards during visits to the prison facilities.

Amnesty International also interviewed prison department staff, prison officers and health staff, local non-governmental organizations, staff of the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), lawyers, and other criminal justice and health experts.

After the visit, Amnesty International shared the findings with the Ghana Prisons Service.