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Liberia: Appalling prison conditions must be improved

Some prison conditions in Liberia are so poor that they violate basic human rights with inmates crowded into dirty cells without adequate food, water or healthcare, Amnesty International said in a new report released today.

Good intentions are not enough: The struggle to reform Liberia's prisons describes the appalling conditions witnessed by Amnesty International in four of Liberia's 15 prison facilities, in spite of some welcome steps taken by the government to improve the system.

"Inmates can suffer permanent damage to their physical and mental health as a result of their incarceration and most haven't even been convicted of a crime – they're simply waiting for a trial date," said Amnesty International's Tawanda Hondora,

"There was no running water in any of the prison facilities we visited and the smell of sewage is overwhelming in most of the cells."

The Liberian government, in conjunction with development partners, has taken some positive steps such as improving sanitation in Monrovia Central Prison and including prison health services in a 10-year national health and policy plan. However much more needs to be done before the state meets prisoners' basic needs.

Severe overcrowding in some prisons has a serious effect on the health and safety of prisoners. Monrovia Central Prison, Liberia's largest, was designed to hold 374 inmates but in July 2011 when Amnesty International visited it was holding 839 prisoners. Conditions were particularly bad in one block where eight men were housed in cells 2x3 metres with only a tiny window for ventilation.

"In some cells there isn't room for all inmates to lie down at the same time so they sleep in shifts," said Tawanda Hondora

Due to a lack of floor space some inmates had created makeshift hammocks made of grain sacks slung three or four metres above ground. Prisoners and staff said people sometimes break their ribs or dislocate their shoulders falling from the hammocks at night

Bedding is scarce and inmates often do not have a mattress or blanket. Almost all inmates complained of body aches because they had to sleep on the floor, which is worse in rainy season when the floor is cold and damp.

Another major concern was the lack of healthcare for inmates. Prisons struggle to provide medical care because of a lack of trained staff and essential drugs. Common conditions such as malaria, skin infections and eye problems are often not treated and inmates are only transferred to a hospital in an emergency.

One badly injured inmate seen by Amnesty International had waited 8 days to be taken to a clinic. He had an open fracture (bone protruding through the skin) of his left arm which was visibly deformed, swollen and infected. As a result of the delay in receiving medical attention he was at high risk of permanent disability.

“Under Liberian law, prisoners must undergo a basic health assessment when they come to prison, but this simply isn’t happening,” said Tawanda Hondora.

“These assessments could help control the spread of communicable diseases as well as provide valuable data about pre-existing medical conditions and those contracted while in prison.”

Liberia’s protracted armed conflict ended in 2003 and since then the government has made significant progress in its efforts to overcome the legacy of the conflict. President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and other key government officials have stated that they are committed to change and are trying to implement judicial reform.

“In all circumstances the government has a clear and binding obligation not to expose prison inmates to conditions that constitute cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment,” said Tawanda Hondora.

“Immediate action is needed to improve conditions, including access to health care, for Liberia’s prison inmates.”