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Bahamas: "Forgotten Detainees" in urgent need of human rights protection

People in detention in the Bahamas are dehumanized by a system that denies them both adequate access to the outside world and to the most basic elements of human dignity, Amnesty International said today, as it published a new report highlighting conditions in detention in the country.

"One in every 200 Bahamians is in prison and the rate of imprisonment in the Bahamas, at 478 per 100,000, is the 8th highest in the world" Amnesty International continued. "Prison overcrowding is just one of the issues the authorities must address immediately."

Amnesty International welcomed the Government's response to its report, "*Forgotten Detainees? Human Rights in Detention in the Bahamas*", which documents findings and makes key recommendations regarding conditions of detention in police, prison or immigration custody. In a 3-page letter, reprinted in the report, the Government stated that it would examine in detail the report's recommendations and committed itself to protecting the human rights of those individuals detained within its custody.

The organization found major breaches of the Bahamas' obligations under the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and other international human rights treaties, with the systematic denial of the rights of children in detention a major concern.

"At the Carmichael Immigrant Detention Centre child immigration detainees are often arbitrarily detained for long periods of time -- months or even years" Amnesty International said. "They receive no education, no exercise and are denied adequate contact with family. At Fox Hill, the island's main prison, children are detained alongside adults in conditions amounting to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, some on charges as minor as vagrancy."

The report notes however that Government and civil society have acknowledged the problems that exist in the Bahamas for prisoners detained at Fox Hill and made serious efforts to embark upon a programme of improvement.

The report also features the case of Kazimierz Kwasiński, an untried prisoner who died in Fox Hill on 28 August 2002, after reportedly being left alone in a cell by guards without medical attention having suffered an asthma attack.

"It is critically important to build on human rights related reforms already initiated," Amnesty International said. "Simple actions in the Kwasiborski's case -- provision of a medical inhaler, earlier intervention by prison and immigration officers, prompt access to legal advice, an interpreter and family -- may have meant the difference between life and death."

"An adequate prison healthcare system will benefit not just prisoners, but staff and the wider community also" Amnesty International stressed.

Amnesty International concludes that urgent action is still needed to end arbitrary detention for immigration detainees, improve conditions amounting to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, investigate reports of ill-treatment and torture and better protect the rights of asylum-seekers, migrants and other prisoners, especially children.

"Tackling issues such as gross overcrowding is not just about providing a minimum level of decency for some of society's most marginalized individuals" the organization said. "Reform will impact upon the ability of the criminal justice system to convict and rehabilitate the guilty and acquit the innocent. The cost of reform pales in comparison to the costs of inaction for society." Amnesty International concluded.

Background

Amnesty International's report follows a research mission to Bahamas in August 2002 and ongoing monitoring since that date. The delegation was accompanied by expert on custodial conditions Professor Rod Morgan, currently HM Inspector of Probation for the Government of England & Wales. The delegation visited the country's sole prison, seven police stations and a detention centre for immigrants, and met with Government and other authorities.

The response of the Government of the Bahamas to Amnesty International's findings is annexed to the report.

For a full copy of the report: "*Forgotten Detainees? Human Rights in Detention in the Bahamas*", please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr140052003>

Public Document

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