

Improving prison conditions and ensuring prisoners' rights in Cambodia

Since 2008, OHCHR Cambodia has been working with the General Department of Prisons to improve prisons, prevent torture and ensure rights to 14,700 prisoners and detainees in Cambodia.



Photo: OHCHR Cambodia

Prisoners doing open-air physical exercise

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Cambodia works to improve the conditions of prison life, upgrade the legal status and professionalism of prison staff, secure the integration of international human rights standards in the domestic legal framework governing the treatment of prisoners and in the management of prisons. Cooperation with the General Department of Prisons (GDP) was formalized in 2008 through the Prison Reform and Support Programme of OHCHR-Cambodia, through which the two institutions work to improve the condition of prisons,

prevent torture and ill treatment, and professionalize the prison service.

In Cambodia, there are 23 prisons and 4 correctional centers in 24 provinces accommodating over 14,700 prisoners, composed of 38% convicted persons with a final judgement, 23% pre-trial detainees and 39% tried in the first instance but without a final judgement (including those pending appeal). Among them, 8% are female and 3% are juveniles. During 1999-2000, rising land prices led the Royal Government to relocate some prisons to increasingly remote areas, where new prisons were constructed with minimal facilities that fell short of international standards. With limited access to fresh air, water, and electricity, and extremely poor sewage and drainage systems, the health of even the healthiest prisoners would deteriorate quickly, exacerbated by overcrowding. OHCHR assistance began with guidance to the GDP on the renovation of old buildings and the construction of new water supply and sanitation systems to improve access to water and improve hygiene. Such assistance was coupled with prison monitoring to inform the policy advice rendered, as well as follow up on individual cases.

Over 2008-2013, OHCHR provided a considerable amount of material assistance to redress the dilapidated state of the prisons. OHCHR installed a number of water pumps and installed water tanks for drinking and daily use, supplied sand bags for flood defense (as many prisons are located in flood prone areas), and provided spades and hoes for farming and for cleaning the drains. Supplies for personal hygiene (such as soap, detergent, toothbrushes and toothpaste) were provided to more than 16,500 prisoners.

The constrained access to fresh air and sunlight in the older prisons used to cause skin diseases in Cambodia's normally hot and humid climate. At the recommendation of OHCHR, the GDP agreed to jointly create 195 new windows and doors. With improved access to fresh

air and sunlight, prisoners now have a much lower risk of contracting scabies and berie-berie.

OHCHR assisted the Department of Health and the GDP to renovate 21 hospital rooms in provincial hospitals to secure them, enabling sick prisoners to be treated without being chained or handcuffed. In three prisons, OHCHR helped to open libraries to enable prisoners to access educational and other reading material. Feedback obtained through confidential interviews with prisoners enabled OHCHR to provide targeted recommendations to improve prison conditions. Among them are the provision of enriched meals, better supplies of fresh water for drinking and daily use, and better sanitation. Prisoners are now allowed to access fresh air for a minimum of 1 hour per day, and in some cases up to 4 hours per day.

Since 2012, the prison reform process has been increasingly internalized in the work programme of the GDP. The renovation work of the GDP of some old prison cells, as well as the construction of new prisons, has drawn from the lessons of joint work in fulfillment of international standards. No confirmed cases of torture have been reported in the past two years. The close working relationship developed with the GDP opened channels for substantive engagement in prison management. The 2014-2018 Strategic Five-Year Plan of the GDP incorporates many of the priority elements for reform. Efforts to implement the Strategic Plan began immediately. A draft Royal Decree on Sentence Reduction and Pardon has been elaborated and is ready for wide consultation among the concerned Government institutions. With support from OHCHR, the GDP succeeded in securing the adoption of a sub-decree on the Status of Prison Staff, which accorded prison staff for the first time a professional status separate from the police force and thus allowed them to create a specialized training programme adapted to their responsibilities.

In 2014, OHCHR began to deliver a training programme on the “Human Rights-Based Approach to Prison Management”¹ to a group of core prison trainers from the GDP and the Police Academy of Cambodia. Through domestic study tours to various prisons organized by OHCHR, the trainers were able to observe first-hand prison staff and managers at work and assess their training needs. Their observations informed the joint revision of the training methodology and curriculum. The feedback has been so positive that it may be instituted as a regular component in the obligatory training for all new prison staff.

There undoubtedly remains much to be done to bring Cambodia’s prisons up to international standards. It remains a part of a law enforcement system that is seriously under-resourced, subject to corruption and free from any independent national monitoring system. Prison overcrowding and arbitrary detention have not been eliminated. Within this sober reality, the multi-pronged approach of OHCHR’s Prison Reform and Support Programme has resulted in a more humane treatment of prisoners, which might be considered to be among OHCHR’s greatest achievements in Cambodia.

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¹ Based largely on a handbook of this title authored by Andrew Coyle, published by the International Centre for Prison Studies (2009), London.