UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing: UN Human Rights on COVID-19 - Prisons

03-04-2020 | Edited NewsCOVID-19

Story

Subject: UN Human Rights briefing on COVID-19 in Prisons / Syria and Egypt.

People deprived of their liberty, including in prisons, pre-trial detention, immigration detention, institutions, and other places of detention are at heightened risk of infection in the case of an outbreak. There is a high risk of contamination and social distancing difficult to achieve. Their situation should be specifically addressed in crisis planning and response.

COVID-19 in Prisons: length 01:49

SOUNDBITE (English)—Rupert Colville, Spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR): “After the High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet’s last week urged governments to reduce overcrowding in prisons in order to prevent catastrophic rates of COVID-19 infection, we are encouraged to note that a number of countries have indeed been taking action on this front.
Iran for example has increased the number it is releasing, at least on a temporary basis, to around 100,000 prisoners – some 40 percent of the entire prison population. Yesterday, Indonesia announced it would be releasing some 30,000 prisoners convicted of minor crimes, including drug use, and we understand Turkey is similarly considering to release a large number of inmates.

Other countries have also been announcing prisoner releases of varying numbers, including of specific at-risk groups such as pregnant women, people with disabilities, elderly prisoners, those who are sick, minor and low-risk offenders, people nearing the end of their sentences and others who can safely be reintegrated into society. We urge States to release every person detained without sufficient legal basis, including political prisoners, and those detained for critical, dissenting views.

We stress that with respect to people fairly convicted of serious crimes recognized under international law, or prisoners who might pose serious risk to others, such people should only exceptionally be considered for temporary release from custody during the course of the pandemic.

And we continue to urge all countries to review who is being held and to take measures as soon as possible to ensure the physical distancing necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19 that the distancing becomes feasible within the prisons.

States should adopt special measures to ensure access to information, preventive and other health care for all persons deprived of their liberty, and urgently explore options for release and alternatives to detention to mitigate the risk of harm within places of detention.

Syria 2:49

SOUNDBITE (English)–Rupert Colville, Spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR): “This one of the countries where the risk of mass infections in prisons is extremely high and which has yet to take any such action. The situation in all prisons and makeshift detention facilities in Syria is alarming -- and particularly so in the overcrowded central prisons, and in the detention, facilities run by the four Government security branches, and in the Sednaya military prison. Even before the onset of COVID-19, we have received a significant number of reports of deaths in the facilities run by the four security branches and in Sednaya, including as a result of torture and denial of medical care.

Vulnerable groups in Syria include elderly people, women and children, and many people with underlying health conditions, some of them directly as a result of the ill-treatment and neglect they have experienced while in detention.

Although smaller in scale, we have similar concerns about the risk to people detained in overcrowded and unhygienic facilities run by non-State armed groups in the north-west, north and east of the country.

We do take note of the recent legislative amnesty decree issued by the Government of Syria on 22 March, granting an amnesty for some crimes and for military deserters, as well as sentence reductions for juveniles and other detainees.

We urge the Syrian Government and the armed groups to take urgent action -- following the example of other countries -- to release sufficient numbers of detainees to prevent COVID-19 leading to yet more loss of life and misery after nine years of unrelenting death, destruction of the health system and displacement in Syria. We also call on all parties to allow humanitarian actors and medical teams unhindered access to prisons and other places of detention to check the conditions under which the detainees are living and assess their needs.

Also, in relation to COVID-19, we urge that those sanctions which are currently impeding the supply of medicines and medical equipment to any part of Syria be eased or suspended during the course of this pandemic. If left in place unaltered, they will hamper the quick and effective healthcare response needed to
prevent or contain the spread of the coronavirus and could therefore contribute to significant loss of life.

We are also concerned that parties to the conflict in Syria are continuing to use essential services such as access to water and electricity as a weapon, and in doing so endanger the lives of large populations at a time when access to water and sanitation are more important than ever to help people protect themselves against COVID-19.”

**Egypt: 02:00**

*SOUNDBITE (English)—Rupert Colville, Spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR):* “While the situation is not in any way comparable with Syria, we are nevertheless also very concerned about the overcrowded prisons in Egypt and the risk of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus among the country’s more than 114,000 inmates. We therefore also urge the Egyptian Government to follow the lead of other states around the world and release those convicted of non-violent offences and those who are in pre-trial detention, who make up just below one third of those in jail.

In Egypt, among those we recommend should also be released are administrative detainees and those who are arbitrarily detained due to their political or human rights work. We also call for the release of those in particularly vulnerable situations due to their age children and older people in particular due to serious underlying medical conditions.

Egypt’s prisons and detention facilities are often overcrowded, unsanitary, and suffer from a lack of resources. Detainees are routinely denied access to adequate medical care and treatment.

We are also concerned by reports the Government has moved to quash criticism on social media and silence the work of human rights defenders and journalists focused on the COVID-19 pandemic.

On 20 March, there were reports that 15 individuals were arrested for spreading alleged “false news” about coronavirus and recently we received information of a doctor and a pharmaceutical worker arrested for a Facebook video and posts complaining about the lack of masks. We advise that, rather than sanctioning critical voices through a punitive approach, the Egyptian authorities address disinformation by providing clear, reliable and fact-based information and seek to engage the population and empower civil society to fight the common threat of the pandemic.”