

## **Sri Lanka's prison conditions**

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It has been said that a country's human rights can be understood by its prison conditions. In other words, prison conditions can be seen as a barometer of human rights. Sri Lanka's prison conditions are surely indicative of a dysfunctional judicial system, where money or power influence judicial procedure. Most Sri Lankan prisons for convicted offenders were built over 100 years ago by the British, at a time where the country's population was about three million. Imprisonment is the end of the Sri Lankan criminal justice system, which has not been working right.

### **The inside story**

I visited the Bogambara prison during a monthly program held by a local human rights group. The program provides the prisoners with an opportunity to watch educational videos, to concentrate their thoughts and express their own ideas.

The small garden improving the prison environment is opposite the main gate, while the kitchen where prison meals are prepared, is a short distance from the main gate. The kitchen looked quite nasty and unsanitary, and none of us was even aware that it was a kitchen until a group of prisoners who worked there mentioned it. It is quite uncertain that the prisoners are provided food of adequate nutritional value, of wholesome quality, and well prepared and served. Next to the kitchen, there was a warehouse, computer room, tailoring room, a tap water facility, and a small ground where prisoners play sports like volleyball.

The prison has 328 cells, and there are five or six prisoners in each cell. As of 10 May 2008, the number of prisoners is up to 2,400. Since each cell is too small for six persons, the prisoners lie down one by one tightly without any mattress, blanket or pillow. Some sleep huddled up. According to the prison's welfare officer, if the court sent 1,000 persons at once, they would have to hold them with no consideration of the prison's capacity. Moreover, he said that there has been no attempt to improve the prisoner's condition where it is already terrible.

The prison was constructed nearly 100 years ago. It is too old to keep properly clean and is not able to incorporate modern equipment. The run-down building cannot hold sufficient facilities for 2,400 prisoners and so suffers from problems such as tap water access, and insufficient toilets and bathrooms.

There is no library. There is no doctor for the 2,400 people stationed on the grounds. Prisoners are not permitted to watch TV, and have no private space. It cannot be reasonable to suffer this miserable situation just because they are prisoners or criminals. They should be given the minimum facilities to live decently and with dignity as human beings, whether they are murderers or robbers.

The Sri Lankan prison system isolates criminals from society. However, since it is impossible to isolate all criminals, the prison has to also give prisoners the opportunity to prepare for a new start in society. One encouraging factor amidst the prison's terrible environment was its education curriculum, which allows prisoners to learn skills with 32 instructors teaching 13 different subjects.

### **The purpose of imprisonment**

Within Sri Lanka the prison system is described as 'correctional services'; individuals are sent to prison for a specific purpose. They are given an opportunity to reexamine the various factors that led them to

commit crimes. Traditionally, it is seen as an opportunity to 'correct' oneself. It must therefore be asked whether the prevailing prison conditions within the country are conducive for such a task, or whether they are designed to project the image that prisoners are a condemned lot, not deserving any respect or attention. In fact, the system has little room for the idea that 'correctional services' should be designed to help inmates look at their lives from a different perspective.

The prisoners have the right to enjoy basic human rights, with the exception of the right to mobility. But the denial of this right has repercussions on a number of other rights, and this needs to be recognized. Furthermore, the behaviour of the inmates must be controlled in a human manner, ensuring that a climate of fear and hatred are eliminated and replaced by respect and dignity. Self respect is the basis for respect of others; the present prison conditions generate only feelings of disrespect and humiliation. Prisons are not meant to be places empty of human rights.

The Human Rights Office of Kandy, a local rights group, attempts to help prisoners retain their self confidence in an atmosphere lacking in dignity and respect. Its work is also important in raising discussion within society regarding poor prison conditions as well as future rehabilitation programs. Sri Lankan society needs to break away from seeing prisoners as condemned and worthless persons.