



Boko Haram arrests worsen Cameroon prison conditions

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Detention conditions in Cameroon's prisons are worsening as thousands of people suspected to have links with Nigeria-based terrorist group Boko Haram are thrown in jail.

Since 2014, at least 1,300 people have been "arbitrarily arrested, and many held in deplorable conditions, which have led to dozens of deaths," said Alioune Tine, Amnesty International's director for West and Central Africa.

At least 700 of these suspected Boko Haram terrorists are currently detained in Maroua Central Prison, where already poor conditions "have been worsened by these massive arrests of Boko Haram suspects", the attorney general for the Far North Regional Court of Appeals, Joseph Belporo, told IRIN.

Under Cameroon's 2014 anti-terrorism law, the military and police have been raiding homes and markets along the northern border with Nigeria searching for suspected Boko Haram militants. Most of those taken into custody are teenage boys and men, and they are often arrested dozens at a time. Many families say they still don't know where their loved ones were taken.

"It [has become] a normal thing for innocent citizens to be arrested and detained for the purpose of investigations at this moment when the country is at war with a terrorist organisation," said Eva Etongue, of the National Commission for Human Rights and Freedoms. "But we are concerned with how these suspects are treated and how long they are being held in custody."

Cameroon's penal code allows judges to keep suspects in pre-trial detention for a period of six months, renewable once, but human rights advocates say many of these prisoners have been held for much longer.

"Since the government started arresting Boko Haram suspects, I am not sure they have released any of them," Marie Nana Abunaw, who runs a local NGO called Prisons Fellowship, told IRIN.

Overcrowded and unsanitary

Statistics from the NCHRF indicate there are now a total of 26,702 inmates in Cameroon prisons. Maximum capacity is not meant to exceed 17,000.

The commission's most recent report on the state of prisons found there is "little or no access by detainees to adequate healthcare facilities, [and] poor sanitation and inadequate feeding." Due to rationing, each prisoner receives just one meal a day, worth less than 150FCFA (\$0.25), they say.

A September report by Amnesty International found that at least 40 inmates at Maroua Central Prison died between March and May last year as a result of inadequate health care and poor sanitation.

The government has denied such allegations, and says that security officers involved in one particular case, where 25 people died while in custody, are no longer on the staff.

Communication Minister Issa Tchiroma Backary maintains that the arrests and detentions are "within the prerogatives of the armed forces, who are facing a faceless enemy," and that the objective of the raids is to "protect national territories and citizens". He insists that soldiers don't intentionally detain innocent citizens without cause.

Responding to the concerns about overcrowding and the protracted detention periods, the president of the Far North Regional Court of Appeals, Fonkwe Joseph Fongang, blamed the situation on a host of factors: a shortage of magistrates; a lack of courtrooms at the military tribunal; lengthy trial procedures; and a "non-mastery" of the new criminal procedural code by some magistrates.

A wake-up call?

Prisons Fellowship's Abunaw, who also served for 31 years as prisons general in Cameroon's Ministry of Justice, said more must be done to improve the conditions for pre-trial detainees.

"Despite the rise in the number of inmates in Cameroon prisons due to the war against Boko Haram, the government has not increased the usual funds allocated for food and other facilities for prisoners," she said. "That is why their situation is getting worse by the day."

In Maroua Central Prison, for example, there is no running water and just 20 latrines for more than 1,200 people, according to Amnesty International.

An ex-convict, Celestin Yandal, who was held in pre-trial detention for 22 months, told IRIN that he suffered "inhumane and degrading treatment and punishment". He claimed that at least five inmates died each week because of the conditions.

"It is a prison without water, electricity and especially without toilets," he said. "Inmates defecate in pots."

Settling scores

Cameroon's Minister of Justice Laurent Eso was aware of concerns that his judiciary was not functioning as it should and did not seek to deny them.

"These claims are not totally unfounded and are not totally exaggerated," he told IRIN.

Eso said the majority of inmates being held in pre-trial detention would have been released if it wasn't for the logjam in court proceedings. He admitted the need to improve detention conditions, and added that the government was seeking to combat cruel and degrading treatment, in accordance with the UN Convention against Torture.

"There are still many examples of cases where justice is not rendered as it ought to be," he said in a speech last year, adding that "such mishandling risks creating suspicion over the entire system." Amowahnou Agbessi, director of the UN Commission for Human Rights and Democracy for Central Africa, told IRIN: "we are aware many innocent people are being held in custody as Boko Haram suspects".

But, he added, "we also know that some citizens in the Far North Region are using the situation to settle scores with their enemies. Some can just run to security officers and tell them that an enemy of his has links with Boko Haram, and given the magnitude of the terror situation, he will be arrested and put behind bars. The government of Cameroon does not want to take chances."

The government says it is currently constructing new prisons across the country in order to alleviate overcrowding. But as the fight against Boko Haram intensifies, conditions will likely get worse before they get better.

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