

## **Congo Prison Hell**

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A visit to Goma Central Prison - nicknamed Munzenze which means impenetrable - was never going to be easy.

Reporting on international justice issues from The Hague, I'd written often that the Congolese justice system was in bad shape - underfunded, ill-equipped and corrupt - but nothing prepared me for the shocking conditions in this prison built for 150 people but now housing 500 inmates - many of them children.

It was surprisingly easy to arrange a visit to Munzenze in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo's North Kivu province. We were interviewing a local NGO worker about prison conditions and asked if he could help get us in to Munzenze. After a quick phone call to the prison director Joseph Mirindi, we were invited that same afternoon - impossible in Europe where a trip to the International Criminal Court detention unit in The Hague takes weeks to organise.

Arriving at this grim and crumbling ruin, we literally knocked on the front door which was secured only with an ordinary Yale lock and apparently guarded by a woman in a colourful head dress. We first spoke to Mirindi in his office and asked if we could look around. Again, he was happy to oblige.

One of Mirindi's officers took us on the tour. Earlier, he'd told us he hadn't been paid since 1996. When I asked him how he survived, he grinned and said his wife worked. Though she may work, we'd previously been told by our NGO contact that prison staff in the Congo supplement their non-existent incomes with bribes from inmates and their families. They have little choice as the government in Kinshasa refuses to send money to pay for salaries, or even food for the prisoners.

Mirindi's office had been miserable but was a palace compared to the prison.

We started our tour in the women's section - small, dark cells off a corridor covered by a leaky roof. Most of the women were gathered in a small courtyard. One was hunched over a charcoal stove; the rest sat staring at the visitors. Most disturbing were the two young girls - aged 12 and 13. The others were older - at least three of whom were accused of arranging the murders of their husbands.

In the men's area, again we saw young boys mixed in with hardened criminals, including military prisoners. On the crumbling walls was graffiti of Jesus Christ and a poster of Britney Spears. It was dirty, smelly and poor. There were no beds, no blankets, no food, no electricity and not surprisingly nothing to do but stand around or squat down in the dirt.

We saw an emaciated man who was too ill to speak who our guide said he'd been shot. I asked if he'd been to see a doctor but was told that Goma hospital wouldn't treat him. The guide didn't answer when we said the man was dying.

It would be hard to say which part of the prison was worst, but I think the small, filthy room housing the mentally ill and those with contagious diseases like tuberculosis was the most awful. It was near an open toilet and the smell was unbearable. A man dressed only in a sack wandered around in confusion, while another leaned against the wall coughing. I didn't know where to look or what to say.

That was the end of our visit, and I couldn't wait to get outside in the fresh air. As I write this on a Friday evening in The Hague, it's hard to think of the men, women and children we met still there at Munzenze, sitting in the dark, waiting.

**Lisa Clifford is an international justice reporter in The Hague.**

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**Link to original story** by Lisa Clifford and Charles Ntiricya in Goma. Published in ACR No. 145, 6-Dec-07.

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**Topic:** Women

**Focus:** ICC - International Criminal Court

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