

Self-Harm Common in Cuban Prisons

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Inmates resort to extreme methods that can leave them disabled.

Inmates of Cuba's prison system frequently harm themselves, often causing permanent physical damage, according to the independent Jagua Press agency.

Jagua Press has gathered evidence from prisoners and their relatives in Cienfuegos province, many of whom say self-harming is commonplace.

Some cases are genuine suicide attempts. Others hope to gain release on grounds of disability, while others still want to draw attention to their cases and get a review.

The methods are often extreme, and include mutilation of fingers, hands and eyes; burning and lacerating the skin; swallowing sharp objects; sewing lips shut; and injecting HIV-infected blood into a vein.

One prisoner told Jagua Press how a fellow-inmate removed both his own eyes, only to be returned to jail after being temporarily discharged for treatment.

One of the most harmful techniques involves injecting petrol into an arm or a leg, which commonly leads to amputation.

Nicolás García Almenteros, sentenced to 30 years for burglary and other offences, had to have one of his hands amputated after injecting it with petrol. Later he did it again, and lost his other hand as a result.

Conditions in Cuba's prison system are poor. Inmates are subjected to beatings, and the reoffending rate is high for those who are released.

One inmate of the Ariza prison who spoke to Jagua Press by phone described poor accommodation, food and healthcare.

"Sanitary conditions are terrible," he said. "Medicines are scarce. Often there aren't even the commonest medicines like glibenclamide for treating diabetes."

Other convicts said Ariza prison was the only one with a proper infirmary, but it was short of pharmaceuticals, and the medical instruments there were inadequate and obsolete.

A health worker at the prison said the unsanitary conditions in Cienfuegos province's jails were an incubator for contagious diseases like cholera.

Complaints about nutrition are common, too.

"They give us rotten 'patipanza' – a food made from cow's stomach and hooves. On more than one occasion they have served us fish with larvae inside," said an inmate.

Sewage leaking from one floor to another from broken drains is a major concern, he said.

"The septic tanks overflow and it's a while before they clean it up," the prisoner explained, adding, "The basement of the building is a paradise for rodents. We've learned to live with the rats; some of my fellow-inmates have been bitten."

One man whose brother is in jail said the shortage of medication and the poor rations were compounded by "unsanitary conditions and overcrowding".

Hunger strikes have become very widespread as a way of protesting against conditions. Prison warders have resorted to harsh methods to deter others. They strip the prisoner naked and hold him in solitary confinement in a damp cell, denying him water.

Political prisoners, in particular, use hunger strikes as a form of protest, among them Sakharov Prize-winner Guillermo Fariñas and Orlando Zapata Tamayo, a dissident who died in February 2010 after starving himself for 86 days.

Following numerous criticisms from the United Nations human rights body, the Cuban government has undertaken some reforms to the prison system in recent years.

The availability of food and its preparation have improved, and inmates are now allowed to make more phone calls than before, and for longer.

The authorities have also launched a new type of open prison where the emphasis is on rehabilitation. Inmates are paid to work in construction and agriculture, and are granted conjugal visits, temporary release, and better food and healthcare.

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