

Suffer the Children

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Children as young as eight-years-old are being subjected to the harsh world of adult prisons.

As I approached the notorious Kabul province detention centre, the shouting and wailing of a number of women at the gates drew my attention. They were pleading for the guards to open the gates to allow them inside.

The guard would only tell them over and over again that it was not permitted. The women, the majority of whom were hidden under burqas, were holding pots of cooked food, fruit and clothing for relatives inside.

Most of those detained are men, but a small number, around 20, are children.

Many are between 15 and 18 years of age - some much younger. Two are alleged murderers and the others are accused of theft.

Few of the latter have committed serious crimes though. The majority will probably have been arrested for stealing a bit of bread or some fruit off a market stall. It seems unthinkable that such children - and some here are as young as eight or nine - should be shut up in an adult prison. It is Dickensian.

They are kept in one room in the prison. The floor is covered with thin plastic sheeting and they sleep on metal bunk beds. The few mattresses and blankets they possess are supplied by their families. The room is extremely damp and most of the children complain of nagging body pain.

One corner of the ceiling is blackened with smoke. When asked about it, Kabir Ahamad, obviously the leader of this group of waifs, told us why it was there. "We had a terrible time with the insects, lice and other things in the room," he said. "We complained a couple of times to the authorities but nothing happened. So, one night, we took a piece of cloth, soaked it with oil and burned it near to where we thought they were coming from."

Najibullah, another child detainee, said, "We are having a horrible time because of these insects. Our bodies are covered in wounds. There is no medicine, nobody cares and when people come to visit the prison no one wants to visit us."

Kabir Ahamad then told me about the meagre rations they were given. "For breakfast, each one of us gets half a piece of bread and for lunch and dinner a piece of bread and a little bit of potato or turnip soup, which never fills us up," he said.

While we were talking, another child entered the room. And the other kids immediately started knocking him around. I asked them what was going on. All said he swept the chief warden Colonel Abdul Hakim's room and didn't share the extra bread he was given for doing this.

The government is responsible for providing the children with food, but it says lack of funds prevents it from doing so. For those who don't have relatives bringing them food there is no choice but to remain hungry.

As for water, there is a well in the compound but because of the drought which has afflicted the country in the past three years it is often dry. In addition, there is no electricity during the day and only occasionally some at night. "The problem," said Hakim "has been taken to the higher authorities but to no avail. We've contacted international organisations - the local Red Crescent has given us some help with medicines."

The UN children's agency, UNICEF, said they had no knowledge that minors were being kept in such poor conditions, but would investigate the matter.

Ghulam Hazim is a pseudonym for a Kabul-based journalist.

Focus: Central Asia

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