

HORRORS THAT INMATES FACE IN NIGERIA PRISONS



Abba Moro, Minister of Interior

Prisons are ideally reformatory institutions, but the case is different in we hereby write on the horrendous experiences by inmates of Nigerian prisons

A prison is not expected to be exactly a bed of roses as the inmates are there for penal purposes. But neither is it also supposed to be a bed of thorns and thistles meant to snuff life out of the occupants. However, for the 49,000 inmates in various Nigerian prisons (29,000 of whom are awaiting trial, while 856 are on death row), hell cannot be worse. The sanitary situation is not only repulsive but frighteningly demeaning and exposes the inmates to health hazards as inmates are forced to excrete in buckets and stay with their excreta for days. Feeding is a luxury, bathing a rarity, recreation zilch, reformation non-existent and privacy a privilege. Hence, most inmates leave the reformatory frail, fragile and with one debilitating disease or the other.

But that runs contrary to what the prison experience is meant to accomplish in the lives of those who transit through them. Prisons are essentially correctional and reformatory; they are not institutions for the dehumanisation of the incarcerated. According to the Nigerian Prison Act 1972, which spells out the goals and orientation of the Nigerian Prisons Service, prisons are charged with taking custody of those legally detained, identifying causes of their behaviour and retraining them to become useful citizens in the society. Apart from keeping inmates in custody, the prison officials hardly do any other thing as they are apparently not interested in

the rationale behind the actions that got the inmates into prisons or bothered about retraining them.

In other climes, there is a difference between a jail and a prison; a jail is a transitional facility for those undergoing legal proceedings, those awaiting judgment on their trial. A prison, on the other hand, is for those whose judicial fate has been decided; those who have been convicted. Therefore, those whose trials are in progress and those whose trials have been decided should not ordinarily cohabit in the same facilities.

Nigerian Tribune findings revealed that the same correctional facilities are used both as jails and prisons in the country. There is no categorisation as those undergoing trial (called awaiting trial in local parlance), convicts and those already condemned to death are treated equally. They are all lumped together in various cells and stripped of their dignity. This is really because like all facilities in the country, the prisons amenities have been stretched beyond their original capacities. So, those undergoing trial are not treated any differently from those already convicted despite the fact that they might end up being left off the hook.

Thus, the prisons are brimming with inmates as there are more inmates than the original capacity of the prisons. For instance, the total inmates in the prisons in Lagos State are by far more than the number the prisons are meant to accommodate. As of Tuesday 18th of October 2011, there were 5,370 inmates at the Badagry Prison, Kirikiri Maximum, Kirikiri Medium, Kirikiri Female and Ikoyi prisons instead of the 2,945 they were built to rehabilitate.

A further breakdown of the inmates in Lagos prisons shows that 4,440 of all the total inmates are awaiting trial and are, therefore, not part of the plans of prison officials. The only thing that they get from the prison officials is food. They are not trained or allowed to undergo any vocational work. Just 936 inmates had been convicted and are facing jail terms, with about 70 of them condemned to death.

The Public Relations Officer of the Lagos State command of the Nigeria Prison Service, Chuks Njoku, a Chief Superintendent of Prisons, while speaking with the Nigerian Tribune stated that the major challenge confronting the state command was the congestion of the prisons.

A source at the Kirikiri Prisons informed the Nigerian Tribune that inmates at the prisons, especially those at Kirikiri Medium Prison, were not enjoying any form of rehabilitation. The source claimed that the number of inmates at the prison was by far more than the capacity of the prison. He added that the prison had a capacity of less than 2000 inmates but at present had more than 3000 inmates.

A top official at the Alagbon Lagos office of the Nigeria Prison Service, who pleaded anonymity, stated that the prisons were only rehabilitating the 936 inmates that had been convicted and that the 4440 who were awaiting trial were just languishing in the prison yards.

The prison official, however, blamed the congestion of the Nigeria prisons on the Criminal Justice System in Nigeria. He also accused the judiciary and the police of hiding under the ineffective justice system in the country to add to the woes of prison inmates. He called on the federal government to ensure a proper reform of the criminal justice system in the country

Nigerian Tribune learnt that the management of each of the prisons is always at its wits' end concerning the welfare of the inmates because of scarce resources. The only respite for the managements comes from some Non-Governmental Organisations, religious organisations and public-spirited individuals who make in frequent donations to the correctional institutions.

It was gathered that the condemned convicts, some of who have been on death row for the past 15 years, are likely to be executed in six states across the country where gallows and shooting range are sited. The prisons are in Lagos, Abeokuta (Ogun State), Enugu, Benin (Edo State), Port Harcourt (Rivers State) and Kaduna.

The breakdown shows that Abeokuta has the largest number of condemned convicts of 143 living in eight cells, followed by the Kirikiri Maximum Prison with 79 from seven states; Enugu Prison has 53 living in 15 cells, Benin has 67 in eight cells, while Port Harcourt, Abia, Imo, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, Cross River and Ebonyi have 192 condemned convicts each.

At the Maximum Prison, Kirikiri, Lagos, there are 79 condemned convicts from seven states. The states are Oyo, Ekiti, Ogun, Osun, Edo, Delta and Port Harcourt.

Investigation revealed that under normal circumstance, three condemned convicts are expected to stay in a cell which is about 8 feet by 10 feet in dimension but because of the poor situation in between nine and 13 are put in a cell.

According to a source, consequent upon lack of space, no condemned convict can lie face down or up, they each have to lie down on one side all night. To worship, the convicts have no choice over where they face, Muslims and Christians face wherever they are placed, as there is no room for any of the worshipper (convict) to go beyond the specified space.

Also because of space constraint, up to four condemned convicts are regularly put in solitary cells, which according to the Nigerian Tribune findings, are meant for convicts serving punishment.

It was out of the 38 solitary cells that the prison authorities cleared 19 for the 74 arrested members of the Boko Haram sect.

In Abeokuta Prison, there are five inmates convicted for armed robbery. A military tribunal set up by the military government before the advent of the fourth republic found them guilty and

they were consequently sentenced to death. But after spending between 15 and 17 years, the death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

They are Lukmon Ajibola, who was convicted in May 16, 1995; Morufu Yusufu was convicted in May 16, 1995; Moshood Folaremi Oladipupo was convicted in September 1993; Paul Faforijin has been in a condemned cell since 1996; Asimiyu Babatunde since 1998; Musiliu Sule since 1990; Mathew Johnson since 1999, Funso Olanipekun since 1999, Julius Awe since 1999 and Dele Akinyele since 1999.

One of the inmates at the Maximum Prison, Kirikiri, Lukman Ajibola (75) was arrested on May 16, 1995 and sentenced to death on September 16, 1998. However, after spending 12 years on death row, the death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment on October 1, 2009.

Nigerian Tribune gathered that the inmate had been moved from the cell to hospital for various ailments at various times. There was a time when he was partially blind and had stroke.