

Zimbabwe's prisons are death-traps

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Zimbabwe's prisoners are suffering untold horrors in Zimbabwe's jails. The State is locking them up in hell-holes, condemning them to slow starvation and possible death from nutrition-related illnesses or the vast array of other diseases they are exposed to through unhygienic conditions. Despite terrible desperation, their position as 'prisoners' means they are denied the most basic human instinct and that is to fight for survival: inmates can't beg for food from passers-by, they can't forage for wild berries in the bush, and they can't rummage through dustbins for waste food. Because of this, Zimbabwe's prisons constitute a unique and especially cruel form of torture that has both physical and psychological impacts on the people affected.

In October last year, the Zimbabwe Association for Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation of the Offender (ZACRO) released a report noting that there are 55 prisons in Zimbabwe (including satellites), with the capacity to hold 17 000 inmates. But in October 2008 it was estimated that more than 35 000 people were in jail.¹ [1] Extreme hunger, inhumane squalid conditions, exposure to a variety of diseases and stripping people of their dignity are standard practices in Zimbabwe's jails, resulting in shameful misery hidden away from the public gaze behind high walls and razor wire.

This article will show that conditions in the prisons have been steadily deteriorating for years. Those in charge of the prisons - **Prisons Commissioner, Paradzai Zimondi**, and **Patrick Chinamasa, the Minister of Justice** - are directly responsible for hundreds of lives lost as a direct result of inhumane neglect.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines 'crimes against humanity' as:

particularly odious offences in that they constitute **a serious attack on human dignity or grave humiliation or a degradation of one or more human beings**. They are not isolated or sporadic events, but are part either of a government policy (although the perpetrators need not identify themselves with this policy) or **of a wide practice of atrocities tolerated or condoned by a government** or a de facto authority.

The failure of the State to feed Zimbabwe's prisoners



Two weeks ago we were told that rations at two Harare prisons had been cut to a quarter of what inmates should receive; a couple of days later there was no food left at all. Food has officially run out at Harare Central and Remand Prison and unless immediate help is provided, the inmates will starve. This is an inevitable conclusion and it is one which is set to repeat itself in all the prisons throughout our nation.

A prison officer working in one of the Harare prisons described their struggle for food throughout 2008; he said, "We've gone the whole year in which-for prisoners and prison officers-the food is hand to mouth... [Prisoners] will be lucky to get one meal. Sometimes they'll sleep without. We have moving

skeletons, moving graves. They're dying."[2](#) [2]

Prisons have struggled for food supplies for several years now. A policeman told reporters in 2006: "We give [prisoners] sadza and matemba (dried fish) boiled in water once every day in the afternoon, when resources are available".[3](#) [3] In June 2006, MP Claudius Makova told parliament that some inmates at Highlands police station were going for two days without food.[4](#) [4]

In 2008, things were much worse: a confidential report written for Paradzayi Zimondi advised him that prisoners at Chikurubi Prison went for days without a meal and were occasionally supplied with food "only meant to keep a person alive" such as sadza and salted, unclean water.[5](#) [5]

Roy Bennett was detained at Mutare Prison for four weeks after being unlawfully arrested in February, and he has spoken out about his experiences there. If it wasn't for the efforts of friends and supporters who brought him food while he was imprisoned, Bennett - like most inmates - would have been deprived of sustenance. In fact, Bennett specifically asked that his supporters kept the food simple so he could share with other inmates in his cell who were starving to death.[6](#) [6]



A few very lucky inmates, like Bennett, survive because their relatives bring them food. But what of those prisoners whose relatives are not informed that they were in jail, or whose relatives cannot afford to travel to provide them with food? ZACRO point out that information about arrests and imprisonment of inmates is often not communicated to relatives resulting in some inmates having no people visit them at all[7](#) [7] : it is these people who are destined for death.

Stephen Bevan, a journalist jailed in 2008, was very direct in his assessment of prison conditions; he said, "If [your relatives] don't know you are in jail, or don't care, you starve".[8](#) [8] Bennett agrees :

"... it's definitely a genocide because anybody that is going into prison for any sustained length of time and does not have family who have the means to support them and come and visit them in prison and bring them food those people are going to die - because the diet that is there nobody can live on".[9](#) [9]

Prisoners are dying in their thousands, their deaths preceded by unimaginable suffering



Towards the end of last year, a senior prison official told a journalist that "An ordinary jail sentence in Zimbabwe today is as good as a death sentence". He said that at least 20 prisoners are dying every day of hunger and disease in Zimbabwe's over-crowded jails.[10](#) [10]

In 2004 it was reported that deaths from natural diseases had surged by more than 400% since 1999, with most of the deaths attributable to AIDS related illnesses, many of which are opportunistic diseases that take advantage of rapidly weakening immune systems and filthy conditions.[11](#) [11] When Roy Bennett left Chikurubi in 2005, he said he had seen "at least three bodies a day being taken out".[12](#) [12] In 2007, a medical orderly working for the prisons services said, "every day, dead bodies are recovered, especially at Chikurubi Maximum Prison, where as many as 10 deaths can be recorded in one day".[13](#) [13]

Despite his horrific experiences at Chikurubi, Bennett described his recent incarceration at Mutare Prison as his "worst prison experience ever"[14](#) [14] and said prison conditions are far worse now than 2005: "There are people there who look worse than the photographs of prisoners in Dachau and Auschwitz".[15](#) [15] He described the inmates he shared a cell with as "walking skeletons":

"Whilst I was there five people died in the most emaciated conditions you could ever wish for, where they had become unconscious, defecating in their blankets and eventually died from the state of the food they were receiving in prison."[16](#) [16]

Some of the images included with this mailing were taken secretly inside Chikurubi earlier this year; [others are stills from the Special Assignment documentary due to be aired on SADC TV3 tomorrow](#) [17]: and they bear testimony to Bennett's account of skeletal starving inmates.

Last year, in a confidential report written for Paradzayi Zimondi, senior prison officials noted that at least 900 inmates had died in the Mashonaland Region alone, pointing out that more people had died in Zimbabwean prisons in 2008 than any other year. This massive death toll is directly attributable to neglect and gross mismanagement; their terrible human suffering derives from an unacceptable tolerance within the prison services (traced right up to those in senior positions) for the criminal and inhumane treatment of human beings.

In fact, the death toll was so high in 2008 that a special cemetery had to be opened at Chikurubi Prison Farm to cope with the corpses. Up until then bodies had been piled up in one room at the

prison, because the Harare Central Prison mortuary couldn't cope with them.¹⁷ [18] This occurrence correlates with Bennett's account of Mutare prison where he said the bodies of people who died lay uncollected in the prison laundry for up to four or five days - enough time for them to start to putrefy.¹⁸ [19]

The terrible truth is that prison conditions have been resulting in an unacceptably high number of deaths for many years. In May 2004, [Sokwanele wrote about the mortuary at Mpilo hospital](#) [20], describing how it was filled to capacity with corpses mostly coming from the prisons:

Those unfortunate enough to have cause to visit the place report that bodies are piled up like so much firewood. The refrigeration system having failed some time ago there is no alternative, and the resulting stench is appalling. A recent visitor to the mortuary counted in excess of fifteen bodies piled up on the floor. Judging by the identical grey blankets in which they were wrapped they were all from the prisons. A few bodies were not in fact covered at all. They lay stark naked, without a shred of dignity or decency in death. A small boy, a green bomber graduate, now working as a mortuary attendant, explained that the prisons were giving them a real problem in the number of bodies delivered which were unclaimed.¹⁹ [21]

Five years on, the problem persists: a mass burial was held in Bulawayo in February this year in an effort to empty Mpilo's mortuary, which is still unrefrigerated and still struggling to cope with the large number of dead bodies. Prior to the mass burial it was storing 250 corpses (it is designed to hold 30); significantly, "Many of those interred in the mass burial were prisoners".²⁰ [22]

"We just gather dead bodies": Disease, overcrowding and unsanitary conditions



Food shortages result in death by starvation, and to diseases resulting from nutrition deficiencies, which can also lead to death. In August last year, seven people died at Mutimurefu prison in Masvingo in one week from Kwashiorkor, a disease that is commonly believed to be caused by insufficient protein consumption, and usually affects very young children.²¹ [23] The word Kwashiorkor conveys a bitter hidden message for Zimbabwe's prisoners; it derives from a Ghanaian word that means "rejected one".

Pellagra is another disease plaguing those in the prisons: it results from a deficiency of vitamin B3 and tryptophan, an essential amino acid found in meat, poultry, fish and eggs. In May 2007, 23 inmates died in Chikurubi from an outbreak of pellagra, and many more were ill from the disease.²² [24]

In 2004, when we first wrote about the conditions in Zimbabwe's prisons, a prison officer told us that tuberculosis (TB), an opportunistic disease, spread like wildfire through the cells with an average of 15 prisoners dying each week from the disease. In

March 2004, 130 people died from TB at Khami Prison in a single month.[23](#) [25] Those who are HIV positive and have compromised immune systems are particularly susceptible to getting TB.

Contagious diseases require infectious people to be kept apart from areas where there are large populations of people closely housed together, but massive overcrowding in the prisons means prison officers can do very little to control the spread of disease.

Edison Chiota, ZACRO's national director said, "I can tell you that a cell designed to carry 10 prisoners is usually packed with 40 people".[24](#) [26] Solidarity Peace Trust reported on the way "political arrestees are routinely and deliberately overcrowded, with 30 or more people being kept at times in cells intended for six".[25](#) [27] In 2004, a former prisoner gave a clear idea of how severe the overcrowding was when he described how prisoners slept in the close confines: "We slept fitting into each other like spoons... Once you have taken a sleeping position you cannot turn and change sides the entire night due to overcrowding. Alternatively, prisoners take turns to sleep."[26](#) [28]

This level of extreme close proximity is especially dangerous during a health epidemic, and Zimbabwe is currently experiencing one of the worst cholera crises that Africa has seen in fifteen years. In November last year, the then Health Minister, David Parirenyatwa imparted advice to the nation on how to avoid cholera, saying "Good personal hygiene like washing hands after visiting the toilet and before taking any food is very important".[27](#) [29] He also said that people should stop shaking hands: "Although it's part of our tradition to shake hands, it's high time people stopped shaking hands".[28](#) [30]

Cholera is a disease that thrives in unsanitary conditions, passed on through bacteria found in human faeces; and it is contagious: one gram of faeces can contain 10 million viruses, one million bacteria, one million parasite cysts and a hundred worm eggs.[29](#) [31] One of the first things that most people comment on when they describe Zimbabwe's prison cells is the overwhelming stench of human urine and excrement.

A political prisoner held at Bulawayo Central prison in 2001 said he could smell the cells from 20m away as he was taken towards them: "The toilet in the corner (a hole in the concrete floor) was overflowing with a mound of excrement over a foot high with rivulets of fluid spreading across the floor as urine dissolved the solids."[30](#) [32] In 2003, protestors arrested at a cricket match in Bulawayo said that the walls of the cells where they were held were smeared with human faeces.[31](#) [33] Morgan Tsvangirai's bodyguards, who were beaten and tortured last year at Harare Central, described how the floors of the cell where they were held were so totally covered with human excrement that, "If you wanted to go to the toilet, they gave you plastic bags to put on your feet".[32](#) [34]

Stephen Bevan said the water supply in his cell was a broken tap: "Prisoners are not expected to wash".[33](#) [35] David Parirenyatwa's advice on how to avoid cholera would be laughable if the situation risks facing prisoners were not so horrific.

Inmates with weakened immune systems are especially vulnerable to catching the variety of diseases in the cells, with their immunity further compromised by poor nutrition, unsanitary conditions and by being kept in close proximity to other sick people. In 2004 it was reported that more than 51% of Zimbabwe's prisoners were infected with the HIV virus - an increase of over 500% since 1999.[34](#) [36] The increase is a tragedy that could easily have been minimised: in 1993, a suggestion that prisoners should be supplied with condoms, which would prevent the spread of the virus, was rebuffed because the authorities feared it would be tantamount to legalising homosexuality, which is a crime in Zimbabwe.[35](#) [37]

It is disgraceful that the State's prioritises concerns related to private human behaviour over the need to save lives. In fact, extreme hunger and food shortages means that the HIV virus is likely to spread more fiercely through the prison population as desperate prisoners fight for survival by selling the only thing they have - their bodies - and trading sex for food. This is already happening.[36](#) [38] Despite this reality, condoms are still not being made available to inmates in Zimbabwe's prisons.

And then there are the bugs... Those lucky enough to be provided with either a uniform or a blanket will find that both are heavily encrusted with lice.[37](#) [39] A former prisoner at Chikurubi reported that "prisoners were permitted to wash their fraying uniforms only twice a month, while they were able to clean their lice-infested blankets even more rarely".[38](#) [40] That was three years ago in 2006: now soap and detergents are an unseen luxury in the prisons. Mosquitoes are rife, with no repellents or nets available and parasitic insects are prevalent. The Telegraph journalist jailed in Harare last year described how his cell was crawling with insects:

As I lay on the concrete shelf, a tiny creature with a flat grey body fell onto my leg and I flicked it off into the darkness below. But another was making its way downwards and more were emerging from the cracks between the bunks and the wall... Gradually, I realised the entire cell was crawling with bugs. I pulled my hoodie tight over my head and tried to ignore them. The sensation of insects crawling and biting every inch of my body, together with the hard concrete bed made trying to sleep torture.[39](#) [41]

When he was released after a couple of weeks in the cells (a relatively short period of time compared to others), Bevan found he had contracted scabies, a skin disease caused by tiny mites that lay their eggs under the skin.

In November 2008, a weary prison guard summed up the overwhelming scale of the human tragedy when he said, "Diseases are so widespread in the prisons that it no longer matters for us to determine which is the most rampant. We just gather dead bodies".[40](#) [42]

Prisoners deprived of dignity and subjected to dehumanising conditions



When Roy Bennett was incarcerated at Chikurubi in 2005 he was provided with a uniform that had excrement on it and a gaping hole in the crotch area, affording him no privacy or personal dignity at all.[41](#) [43] His experience is not unusual.

In 2006 a prison official anonymously talked about the severe shortage of uniforms, saying that inmates had to share clothes: "Priority for uniforms is being given to suspects in remand prison who would be attending court. Some of the prisoners have to stay naked, but it's kind of rotational."[42](#) [44]

A prisoner released from Chikurubi in 2006 confirms that this is true: "We were told to remove our uniforms and hand them over so that the guys going to court appearances could wear them. We would stay naked or sometimes we would wrap those torn prison blankets, but then again they are not enough."[43](#) [45]

Officially, each prisoner is entitled to four blankets, but owing to the huge pressure on resources brought about by overcrowding, a prisoner is typically allocated just one - if they are lucky.[44](#) [46]

It is those who are on death row who are subjected to some of the most cruel and inhumane treatment out of all prisoners: Kevin Woods, jailed for murder, spent 19 years in prison and 5 of those were in solitary confinement on Chikurubi's death row. He was given clemency in 2006 and survived to describe a hell that most civilised people would not subject rabid dogs to. He spent 2 out of his 5 years on death row stark naked and without blankets - and he was lucky:

"There's one man who's been on death row in Chikurubi for 17 years. He's completely mad now. And of course we had to go around naked. But the worst was that, on death row, you never breathe fresh air or see the sky. Never."[45](#) [47]

Forgotten, abandoned or ignored - even the innocent



People, who are possibly completely innocent of crime, or guilty only of petty theft, have nevertheless spent years locked up in Zimbabwe's death-traps. Roy Bennett called attention to the case of one man who was 'lost in the system' when he alerted the world to the plight of Elvis Nodangala, a South African who was arrested on 3 October 2008 and had yet to be charged or appear in court.[46](#) [48] Nearly six months in jail, without any legal representation, is a thought that would fill most with horror - but Elvis was 'lucky' for two reasons: first, because Roy Bennett was there to raise his profile, and second, because he was only in jail for a few months.

In 2003, chief magistrate Samuel Kudya raised the issue of those on remand saying that some of them were "spending up to four years awaiting trial".[47](#) [49] In 2006, Justice Rita Makarau described Zimbabwe's prison conditions as "embarrassing and disturbing" because she had visited Harare Central Prison and met ten people who had been incarcerated

for up to ten years without trial. She quite rightly said, "We have no excuse for this delay - it is imperative prisoners who deserve to be released should not stay here."[48](#) [50]

ZACRO point out that the majority of Zimbabwean prisoners are very poor and cannot afford legal representation, which means - regardless of whether they are innocent or guilty - they have to wait their turn for legal help. Waiting your turn for legal representation can mean upwards of two years in jail before they get their day in court.[49](#) [51] Like many in the civil service, magistrates have resigned in large numbers to find better jobs; building longer delays into the system and exacerbating an already severe problem, with tragic consequences for those on remand. Beatrice Mtweta has said that "[Magistrates] are paid so little they can barely afford to buy a Coca-Cola."[50](#) [52]

It's worth remembering that the State has yet to account for seven missing abducted MDC activists: Gwenzi Kahiya, Ephraim Mabeka, Lovemore Machokoto, Charles Muza, Edmore Vangirayi, Peter Munyanyi and Graham Matehwa.[51](#) [53] Where are they? Are they still lost somewhere in one of Zimbabwe's prisons alongside other forgotten souls like Elvis Nodangala?

Children are not spared the horror of Zimbabwe's prison cells



The most grotesque examples of indifference to the plight of the innocent involve our nation's children.

In recent years the Zanu PF led-government indiscriminately launched crackdowns against peacefully protesting political activists and human rights activists, and if children and babies were present, they simply got locked up too. In April 2008, the police raided the MDC headquarters in Harare and arrested over 60 people, most of whom were seeking refuge from political violence, and most of whom were women and children. Because the arrest took place on a Friday, as many as 24 babies and 40 children - vulnerable young people already traumatised by political violence - were crammed into the filthy unhygienic Southerton police cells over the weekend.[52](#) [54]

In 2006, Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) marched in protest against school fee hikes, and 73 children, aged between 7 and 18 and wearing their school uniforms, were briefly detained in Bulawayo along with their mothers.[53](#) [55] Children have also been forced to witness gross violence before being detained in unacceptable conditions: in 2005 WOZA gathered for a prayer vigil which was violently broken up by the police before 250 women and children were arrested. One of those arrested described images that must have terrified the young: "Many of the women have blood all over their clothes".[54](#) [56]

Last year saw a case that horrified the world: Nigel Mutemagau, the two year old boy pictured above was abducted (not arrested) along with his political activist parents in October 2008.[55](#) [57] Nigel was beaten in front of his mother as part of the State's attempt to force confessions from her.[56](#) [58] The small boy spent 124 days in a filthy disease-prone cell before he was released into the care of MDC officials. His mother was bailed much later.

In 2006, the Prison Fellowship of Zimbabwe (PFZ) estimated that over 200 toddlers were in Zimbabwe's jails with their mothers.[57](#) [59] The harsh economic climate means the prison system makes no special arrangements or concessions for children: baby clothes are not supplied and in winter they share their mother's blanket for warmth. In the past, mothers with toddlers in prison were provided with extra rations to feed their children, but not anymore: the extra rations of soap, peanut butter and milk are long-forgotten luxuries, and children now face the same extreme shortages of food as their mothers do. An IRIN article describes how one 12 month old toddler was clothed through the kindness of prison guards who clubbed together to buy her a dress.[58](#) [60]

Apart from the obvious risk to the child's health and development, posed by disease and unsanitary conditions, there is an additional risk to their security because they are sharing space with criminals, some of them guilty of violent crimes. In 2008, an activist visiting the psychiatric section of Khami prison described how he saw toddlers sharing living facilities with mentally ill patients. Some of the inmates in the psychiatric unit were jailed for murder - most alarmingly, he said that some of the women were in the psychiatric section because they had murdered their own children.

Why should ordinary Zimbabweans care about the plight of prisoners when they are suffering too?



Zimbabwe is struggling towards freedom and democracy, and trying to move away from a culture of violence and hate and retribution. The principle that every human has rights exists to ensure that every one of us - without exception - is protected, and this value is sacrosanct in a civilised society. One of the definitive marks of a *civilised* society is one where everyone - even the *least civilised* - is treated in a *civilised* way.

We need to remind ourselves that many of the criminals dying in Zimbabwe's jails may have been driven there through desperation, turning to petty theft and crime as a means to survive hyperinflation and extreme hardship: a journalist jailed last year said charges against many of the people he shared a cell with were "almost arbitrary", noting that many people were never charged, just detained and then released.⁵⁹ [61]

This article does not seek to absolve those who are guilty of crime from being held accountable for their criminal behaviour; rather, it argues that stripping people of their dignity and their basic human rights, then condemning them to hellish experiences that set them on a path towards painful death, is State-sanctioned behaviour that can never ever be dressed up as 'fair punishment'. We ask that our readers see these things for what they are: at best, a gross violation of basic human rights and at worst, a crime against humanity.

We also need to recall that those who are innocent of crime are not exempted from cruel treatment - there but for the grace of God go many of us! In recent years, Zimbabwe's prisons have been used as a tool for political control - the conditions within them constituting a particular form of psychological torture at the hands of the State that seeks to destroy spirits. The list of those who have been arrested include political activists, journalists, human rights activists, election officials (jailed last year after the March 29th elections) and business people for so-called price-control violations - and children.

For the very unlucky, sometimes all it takes to be jailed is to be an ordinary human being in the wrong place at the wrong time: in 2004 a businessman was locked up for telling someone that Robert Mugabe "printed useless money".⁶⁰ [62] History has proven him right, and everyone would have agreed with him even in 2004; but he was still charged with denigrating the President, a crime that carries a sentence of one year in jail.

That businessman's experience gives real weight to the adage 'it could be you'.

An documentary on Zimbabwe's prisons, including secret undercover footage filmed within the prisons, will be screened on 31 March 2009 (Tuesday) at 9.30pm on Special Assignment, an investigative programme on SABC TV3. Some of the images in this article are still from that documentary. More [here](#) [63].

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