



Cameroon: Unsanitary conditions of detention lead to cholera outbreak in prison

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At least six people are reported to have died from cholera in a Cameroonian prison. This is due to unsanitary conditions of detention, with reduced access to hygiene and overcrowded infrastructures.

On 25 March 2022, the Cameroonian Minister of Public Health announced an outbreak of cholera at the New Bell Central Prison in Douala. The government reported 300 cases and 29 deaths between 16 and 22 March in the country. Since then, six new deaths have officially been registered in New Bell Prison. One of the detainees disputes this figure: "I have seen at least 89 people die in the prison due to cholera and several others hospitalized".

An unsanitary environment facilitated the spread of the disease

The resurgence of cholera comes at a time when the country is already facing the Covid-19 pandemic. Cholera is defined by the World Health Organization as an acute diarrhoeal infection caused by ingestion of food or water contaminated with the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*. It thrives in unsanitary environments.

New Bell Prison, built in 1902 with a capacity of 800 inmates, is severely overcrowded. It is estimated to host at least 5,000 people, a number that increases daily due to the arrival of new pre-trial detainees. Sanitation facilities, such as toilets, water points and other infrastructures, are outdated and almost inaccessible. Testimonies of detainees point to the poor quality of food, the absence of running water and the lack of drinking water. These factors make New Bell Prison a favourable environment for the spread of contagious diseases, as is the case for a lot of Cameroonian prisons. Restrictive measures, such as regular hand washing, disinfection of premises and other hygiene rules that can help limit the spread of these diseases cannot be followed with such a high concentration of people and lack of resources.

Solutions may include the release of prisoners, better hygiene and more monitoring

Access to health care is internationally and regionally recognized as a fundamental right for prisoners by the United Nations, as well as by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. States are responsible for providing healthcare to prisoners and have a duty to ensure the health and well-being of persons deprived of their liberty. All detainees have the right to adequate food and drinking water.

To this end, it is important that the Cameroonian government provide urgent solutions aimed at improving the daily life, health and access to hygiene of prisoners.

As a matter of urgency and in order to reduce the prison population in the face of the cholera outbreak, **the OMCT and CHRDA call on the Cameroonian government to:**

- Prioritize the release of prisoners accused of minor offences to lessen prison overcrowding, which has been exacerbated by the Anglophone Crisis in the two English-speaking regions, the Boko Haram insurgency in the northern regions, and political protests by militants of the opposition party;
- Improve the quality of food for prisoners so that they have access to a healthy and balanced diet on a daily basis;
- Make drinking water accessible by increasing the number of supply points;
- Multiply the number of toilets and sinks to allow prisoners to take proper showers and relieve themselves. Unsanitary toilets and sinks are one of the main causes of diseases with a high potential for proliferation, such as cholera or Covid-19;
- Grant civil society organisations full access to places of detention so that they can provide urgent direct assistance, medical, psychosocial and legal support to prisoners during this time of health crisis.

The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) is the largest global NGO group actively standing up to torture and protecting human rights defenders worldwide. It has more than 200 members in 90 countries. Its international Secretariat is based in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa (CHRDA) is an independent, non-governmental, apolitical and non-profit making organization created in 2005, dedicated to the protection and advancement of human rights and the promotion of democracy as a political culture in Africa. CHRDA is based in Buea in the Southwest region of Cameroon.

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