

Racism and Injustices in Cuban Prisons

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It is difficult to describe an experience like personally enduring the deplorable conditions and mistreatment that characterize daily life in Cuban prisons. One of the realities that most hit me at first was to ascertain that more than 80% of the prison population was black, that we blacks are the primary victims of this prison system's cruelties.

Contrary to what has been legally established by organizations like the United Nations, prisoners in Cuba are confined to living in reduced confinement spaces that measure less than seven feet. Furthermore, all the cellblocks are overpopulated and many have no other option but to sleep on the floor.

This overcrowding causes inmates, and the high, tropical temperatures, to generate unbearable heat. Crueler yet is the fact that the military men who run these prisons prohibit the installation of water coolers or air conditioning units.

Outbreaks of infections are also very common, due to the fact that overcrowding, among other things, facilitates the rapid spread of illness, as do the terrible hygienic conditions and abundant presence of transmitters like rats, flies, mosquitoes and roaches.

The harsh survival of prisoners is intentionally complicated even more by a drastic reduction in their access to water, which is only offered to them for a few minutes, two or three times a day, during which time it is barely possible to get a drink of water let alone do any-

thing else. Hunger is another traumatic condition, since the prison diet even fails in satisfying the most basic requirements for sustaining life. Food is scarce in quantity, very poorly prepared, and lacks nutritional value.

Many people enter prisons in a healthy state and exit them in a sickened condition. Illnesses most associated with a lack of food are the most common: malnutrition, neuropathies and anemia. One also sees many incidences of psychiatric trauma, polyparasitism, respiratory and diarrheic infections, skin fungus and infectious conjunctivitis.

Prisoners who suffer from chronic illnesses like diabetes, high blood pressure, and bronchial asthma must endure not just the inconvenience of the terrible living conditions, but also a constant stress that contributes to their worsening condition, making dealing with their illnesses much more difficult. This situation is made even worse by a lack of adequate medical attention. Prison guards are the ones who decide who to take to a doctor, and when; this has caused the death of inmates due to delays in their treatment, or because they have not allowed them to be examined by health professionals.

Normal people are locked up in cellblocks with mentally ill prisoners, and others who cannot adapt to prison life because their health—physical or mental—is in a deteriorated state. During my own experience, I shared my space with mentally ill, HIV positive, tuber-

cular, and handicapped people; I even bunked with a blind man, and with terminally cancer victims in their final phase of life. The degree of insensitivity with which these people are treated by military men or courts is absolutely shocking. They show no concern whatsoever for the conditions in which they keep those prisoners.

Mistreatment and abuses at the hands of military men are the norm at prisons. They have absolute impunity and immunity in these matters. Prisoner beatings and punishments are often so vicious in nature that they cause serious injury to their defenseless victims. The horrifying nature of these practices causes prisoners to opt for hurting themselves, and attacking others, as a desperate way to end their situations.

There is no planning of recreational or artistic activities that might contribute to attenuating the violently and aggressively charged environment of prisons in Cuba. Neither are religious practitioners of diverse denominations allowed to receive spiritual assistance. Contact with family members is restricted to a minimum; a mere one or two hours, every one, two or three months, depending on the severity of the punishment imposed.

Despite the fact that the State has a budget for running prisons in Cuba, and it is supposed to cover all costs, prisoners are constantly extorted and promised possible improvements in their situation if they provide economic resources or benefits to the prisons and military men. Most prisoners who work do not receive a salary. Instead, they are rewarded with visits. These prisoner-workers are forced to get their families to bring the resources and tools they need to carry out the work they are assigned. Those who cannot fulfill these humiliating requirements cannot work, and have to remain locked up in their cellblocks.

Corruption is habitual among guards and officials, who control most of the contraband:

alcoholic beverages, drugs, and weapons within the cellblocks. They are also the ones who reap the benefit of selling family and conjugal visits, and offering certain jobs, or transfers to less rigorous areas of confinement, and even the possibility of visiting home. These are only some of illegal activities on the inside among those in charge.

A high percentage of prisoners suffer the results of the rules and other conditions protected under current law being broken or ignored. Many of them are unjustly incarcerated; others have been condemned for acting on a dire need to feed their families. In some cases, the incriminating evidence comes about because of some state bureaucrat's moral convictions, or because the accused is tagged as being 'dangerously pre-criminal.' These arbitrary actions and injustices take place in full view of the insensitively indifferent or complicit authorities, who should be concerned with laws being respected.

It is calculated that about 100,000 inmates in Cuba are being forced to survive a racist and cruel prison system that is designed not only to deprive them of their freedom but also to destroy their human dignity.

The whole time I was incarcerated, I received much evidence of solidarity, love, and support from friends and people of good faith. I am very grateful to all. I should also give special mention to the actions taken on my behalf by the Black Movement's intellectuals and leaders—led by two famous brothers, Abdias Nascimento and Carlos Moore—and the work concerning my situation that was published in the very pages of this well-known journal. Many thanks. I would like to greet to you all, and restate my commitment to the peaceful struggle for bringing about the possibility of respect for the fundamental freedoms and individual rights of all.