



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Advancing Human Rights Through International Prison Reform

Wednesday, January 17, 2018
2:30 – 4:00 PM
2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good afternoon. I join my colleague and co-chair, Randy Hultgren, in welcoming you to our hearing today on *Advancing Human Rights Through International Prison Reform*. I especially want to thank our witnesses for their presence and for sharing their expertise and recommendations with us on this important issue.

As we will hear this afternoon, more than 10 million people around the world are imprisoned. In most regions the number of people imprisoned has grown since 2000, often substantially – in the Americas, 108% (excluding the U.S.), and 75% in southeastern Asia and the Middle East.

Women make up a relatively small but growing share of the prison population.

Many prisoners face dire conditions: over-crowding; violence, both inter-prisoner and between staff and prisoners; torture; denial of health care; unhealthy and insufficient food; forced labor. Privacy is scarce, to put it mildly.

Children, women, the disabled and LGBTQ people are especially vulnerable to discrimination and mistreatment, including sexual violence.

Many imprisoned people are in pre-trial detention, meaning they suffer these conditions without yet having been convicted of anything.

As we hear the bad news about prison conditions around the world today, it is worth reminding ourselves why societies imprison people in the first place. What are we trying to accomplish when we put people in jail?

There is pretty wide agreement that we imprison people for two reasons: to deter crime, and to reduce recidivism – to make it less likely that people will continue to commit crimes.

But if people come out of a prison system broken and embittered, with their families destroyed and unprepared to work – and stigmatized to boot – it is unlikely that societies will achieve those goals.

Not much good comes from breaking people's souls.

The good news is that there is widespread international consensus on the standards that should guide the treatment of prisoners and protect vulnerable populations of prisoners like women and children. The Mandela rules, named for Nelson Mandela and adopted by unanimous consent by the UN General Assembly in 2015, embody that consensus.

Complementary rules like the Bangkok rules for women and the Beijing rules for youth provide guidance for vulnerable populations.

These rules begin by recognizing the fundamental human rights of every person, without distinction of any kind. A prisoner is still a human being, deserving of dignity – and of hope.

The issue is how to translate this basic reminder into concrete steps to improve and reform prison practices.

Our distinguished witnesses this afternoon engage and lead prison reform efforts around the world.

I look forward to hearing from them about the challenges they face, as well as the progress that is being made – are there countries where conditions are improving? Are there best practices to share?

And most important for us – what more can the United States Congress do to end human rights abuses against prisoners around the world, and ensure that they are treated with dignity.

Thank you.