



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Advancing Human Rights through International Prison Reform

January 17, 2018

2:30 – 4:00 PM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good afternoon and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on Advancing Human Rights through International Prison Reform.

This is an issue that is very close to my heart. I offer a warm welcome to all our witnesses today, and I want to also acknowledge my strong bond with one of our witness organizations, Prison Fellowship.

In fact, I'm a founding member of Prison Fellowship's Faith and Justice Fellowship, which was established in 2016 to bring together a group of policy makers from various faith traditions and political parties, united in a desire to promote restorative values in the criminal justice system.

I know Craig DeRoche will talk about the inspirational story of Prison Fellowship and its founder, Chuck Colson. Chuck Colson had a huge impact in my life.

My concern for prisoners, and about the need to improve prison conditions, comes from my faith, as it does for so many others.

But even if you don't come to this issue through religious faith, I hope everybody watching this hearing at least has faith in this: that every life has intrinsic value and dignity, and that every prisoner has the potential to redeem himself or herself.

Unfortunately, too many prisons are run in a way that crushes that human dignity. This is true around the world and, yes, even here in America.

This is a Human Rights Commission, and I believe that anybody who knows the facts about prison conditions worldwide will have to agree that terrible violations of human rights are inflicted on millions of prisoners.

It is not a contradiction to recognize that, although some people deserve to be imprisoned, while they are in prison their treatment should meet basic human rights standards.

Nelson Mandela, himself a prisoner for nearly 30 years, famously said that “no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.”

And when we look inside jails around the world, what will we find? Too often, we find torture: but even where explicit torture is not used, there are conditions amounting to torture.

Prisons where horrific violence is condoned while wardens turn a blind eye.

Terrible overcrowding and a lack of health services which, when combined, seem designed to spread the worst diseases – HIV, tuberculosis, and hepatitis among them.

In too many prisons, prisoners lack basic clothing, food, potable water, or even sufficient light to see.

The impact of these conditions is often disproportionate on vulnerable populations, including youth and women.

And this mistreatment has an impact beyond the prisoners themselves: it is an impact that is shared by the innocent families of prisoners who live on the outside or, appallingly, are sometime forced to move into the prison themselves.

We find the impact on communities, where prisoners who have been denied any meaningful chance to improve themselves, or motive for reform, will be returned to society ripe for recidivism.

During this hearing, we will discuss what is wrong with prisons worldwide, and how the reality of prison life often fails to meet those minimum standards.

But I believe we can also learn about real solutions that are being tried – and succeeding. Programs and ideas that transcend partisan boundaries and which can give us hope that meaningful international prison reform is possible. And with that reform comes a positive impact on individuals, their families, and their communities all over the world.

There are internationally accepted Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, known – fittingly – as “the Mandela Rules.”

Philipp Meissner is the Prison Reform Focal Point in the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in Vienna, Austria. Mr. Meissner has come to Washington to discuss these rules, and he is our first witness.

###