

Real danger of diseases spreading in prisons

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■ **By Sonia Ramachandran**
sonia@nst.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR: A single toilet shared by 40 to 70 prisoners who can go without soap, toothpaste and detergent for long periods of time.

Contagious diseases like HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and skin diseases spreading at an alarming rate due to prisoners sharing limited personal space.

There are also the attendant problems with discipline that come with cramping prisoners in such an environment.

The ideal officer to prisoner ratio for rehabilitation is 1:10 but it is sometimes even 1:60 in Malaysian prisons as is the case at the Penang jail.

The Simpang Renggam prison in Johor and the Sungai Buloh prison are grossly overcrowded, holding 90 per cent more prisoners than they should.

There are 4,200 detainees at Simpang Renggam and 4,535 at the Sungai Buloh prison when they should have only 2,500 inmates each.

It is not surprising, therefore, that overcrowding is taking its toll on prisoners and prison officials, stretching resources to the limit in the 47 prisons and detention centres nationwide.

As of March 13, there were 48,110 inmates in such places, an excess of almost 10,000 inmates.

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*Datuk Hassan Sakimon
Prisons Department
Rehabilitation and
Treatment director*

Prisons Department Rehabilitation and Treatment director Datuk Hassan Sakimon said overcrowding in prisons had reached a critical level.

"Prisons are like universities. If a university can only receive 3,000 students, then it cannot take in 4,000 as its infrastructure and facilities cannot sustain that.

"The capacity of each prison

has to be set, only then can standards be maintained," he told a Human Rights Commission (Suhakam)-organised roundtable discussion on prison and detention centre conditions.

Among those who attended the discussion were representatives from the Internal Security Ministry, Bar Council, Attorney-General's Chambers, Health Ministry,



Legal Aid Bureau, the police and the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry.

Hassan said prison officers did not have the power to refuse prisoners even if prisons were filled to capacity.

"But courts also have no choice as to where to put prisoners. For us to have the power to refuse prisoners, laws have to be relooked."

He said there were 12,600 officers in the department, but 1,000 vacancies had not been filled.

Hassan suggested moving prisoners from crowded institutions to less crowded ones, as well as building new establishments besides upgrading old ones.

On how to address overcrowding, he said the situation would ease when laws were amended to implement the parole and community service system.

"This will definitely reduce the number of inmates at prisons," he added.

Earlier, Suhakam commissioner Datuk N. Siva Subramaniam said prison directors should refuse additional prisoners when prisons were overcrowded.

He also called for the speeding up of cases as thousands under remand were languishing in prisons.

He suggested building separate prisons for foreigners.