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South African drug mule Nduduzo Siba poses for a photograph during an interview with AFP on Nov 29, 2018 in Sao Paulo, Brazil. — AFP photos



Portia Dliwayo

On parole, foreign ex-convicts battle to survive in Brazil

When South African drug mule Thandi was freed from a Rio de Janeiro jail in June, she had no money and nowhere to go - until a Brazilian policeman agreed to help her, for a price. "The police officer offered me... his phone and some money to catch a bus if I could perform a sexual favor for him," the 33-year-old, who did not want to use her real name, told AFP. "He took me to a hotel and thereafter gave me 30 reais." That's about seven dollars.

Thandi is one of hundreds of foreign ex-convicts who served time in Brazil - mostly for drug trafficking - and are now struggling to survive while serving out their parole. With little support from authorities in Brazil or in their home countries, they battle to find housing and obtain identity documents. Without official papers, they cannot find jobs or open bank accounts. Many speak little or no Portuguese.

"A lot of my sisters end up prostituting themselves and contract diseases and die and get buried here," said Thandi, a mother of two. She has to stay in Brazil until the end of 2020. For Artur Gueiros, a professor in criminal law at Rio de Janeiro State University, the state bears responsibility for supporting foreigners like Thandi who are trying to bounce back after prison. "It's a humanitarian issue that's not being respected," Gueiros, who is also a regional state prosecutor, told AFP in a telephone interview. Many foreigners in Brazil, notably Filipinos, "also go through this sad situation. Abandoned, relegated, they are in a limbo," he said.

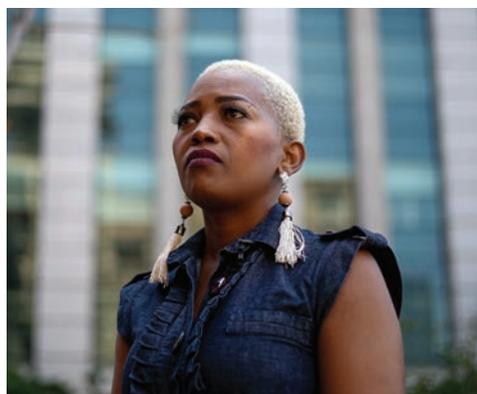
'Trying to survive'

Brazil's jails held 2,161 foreign prisoners in 2017, according to the most recent official figure. Most of them are from other Latin American countries. A quarter hail from Africa. Foreign inmates were given the right to parole in 2014. But they have to remain in Brazil for the duration of their sentences before being expelled. Their countries can apply for early deportation, but Gueiros said few do because the embassies have to pay the airfare.

Nduduzo Siba, 31, spent nearly four years in a Sao Paulo prison after cocaine was discovered in boxes of perfume she was carrying. Siba, who is also from South Africa, says she was released in 2017 without even a last dinner. "They said 'Go!' - eight o'clock at night. I was like 'But I don't have money, I don't have anything, I don't have a phone, I don't know anyone, I don't know where to go!'" she said. Many ex-inmates sup-

port each other through informal networks. But some fall back into drug trafficking, according to AFP interviews with former prisoners.

"There was no way I could survive," said 36-year-old Precious Ndubuisi, explaining her decision to return to the narcotics trade. More than half of Brazil's foreign inmates are held in Sao Paulo state. They are jailed separately from Brazilian prisoners and offered workshops such as Portuguese lessons. This support crumbles, however, once they are freed.



Precious Ndubuisi

The Institute for Land, Work and Citizenship - a human rights group known by the Portuguese acronym ITTC - started a support program for female foreign ex-inmates two years ago. Since then, it has helped more than 300 get their documents as well as find jobs and a place to stay. ITTC president Sister Michael Mary Nolan said government departments dodge responsibility for the foreigners. Many end up living on the street.

"They're not doing anything," she told AFP. "There's a difference among the city and state governments over who should receive them." Brazil's overcrowded and deadly prison system is already struggling to deal with its own nationals. Foreigners make up only a fraction of the country's more than 726,000 inmates, the world's third-largest prison population after those of the United States and China, according to the online database World Prison Brief. "The situation of prisoners, both Brazilian and foreign, has always been left aside," said Gueiros.—AFP

NY rents in the Sahara? Living in Africa's most expensive city

Chad is one of the world's poorest countries, but in its capital, N'Djamena, rents rival those of New York or London at upwards of \$2,000 a month for a two-bedroom flat in the city center. The dusty city on the edge of the Sahara was ranked the most expensive in Africa and 11th in the world this year by global consulting firm Mercer, which bases its annual index on the average cost of living for employees working abroad. The ranking is aimed at expatriates, whose modern flats are a far cry from the tin-roofed shacks where many locals live.

But Chadians said that for them too the city is prohibitively expensive, with the price of housing and utilities in particular pushing many people out to neighborhoods on the periphery with no roads, electricity or running water. "Everything is expensive here," said taxi driver Mahamat Tahir, who spends his days in a cloud of hot fumes on the city's potholed streets, where roadsides are crammed with people selling peanuts and mosquito nets.

The minimum monthly wage is 60,000 CFA francs (\$100) but Tahir estimated daily expenses to buy food and get around the city at about 5,000 CFA. A typical roadside lunch is 2,000 CFA, and bringing home a small chicken for dinner costs twice that. The numbers don't add up, said Tahir, and it causes constant financial stress. Chad's landlocked location, oil-dependent economy and lack of infrastructure all contribute to the high prices, according to researchers. Nearly everything from food to clothing to furniture is imported and often by plane.

Although N'Djamena is at the far end of the spectrum on cost of living, it also exemplifies a problem across the continent, said Shohei Nakamura, an economist at the World Bank focusing on poverty and equity. In a study published this year, Nakamura and colleagues found that African cities are on average at least 20 percent more expensive than cities in other parts of the world with similar income levels. Goods and services such as transport, communications and housing are especially pricey, he said - mainly because the supply of decent housing and infrastructure falls far behind demand. Chad's government spokesman did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Luxury products

Like many Chadians of his generation, Williams Deonodji Ngargoto has a good job but, in his thirties, still lives with his parents, siblings and cousins in the family home. It is tradition to live with your family until you are married, he said, but also a necessity due to the rising cost of rent. Frustrated with their situation after university, Ngargoto and a group of friends in 2014 created the Association Against the High Cost of Living, for which he is now the spokesman.

They hold protests and press conferences, and try to pressure the government to introduce reforms. The group has had some successes, Ngargoto said, such as a reduction in the price of cooking fuel earlier this year and in 2017 the elimination of a tax on trucks entering N'Djamena market. In May the government launched a "fair prices" initiative to reduce consumer prices for food products throughout the country, but Ngargoto said it has made little difference.

The Central African nation has been weighed down by drought, a refugee crisis and a costly military campaign to combat militant group Boko Haram, which is based in neighboring Nigeria but wages attacks across the region. The number of Chadians living in poverty is projected to reach 6.3 million in 2019 up from 4.7 million in 2011, according to the World Bank. The population is about 16 million. On the UN Human Development Index, which measures health, education and quality of life, Chad ranks third to last in the world.

In N'Djamena's "European quarter", as some locals call it, guards sit outside modern apartment buildings and restaurants favored by expatriates. In neighborhoods further from the center, the streets are unpaved and people pump water in dirt courtyards. This is where Ngargoto lives with his family, just within city limits where he said a room costs about 40,000 CFA francs (\$68) a month to rent.

But even that is unaffordable for many, who instead live across a bridge where the landscape becomes rural, with small houses scattered through scrubland. This neighborhood, called Toukra, is home to many middle-class commuters, said Ngargoto. Alongside the one paved road, students and professionals walked in the sun hoping to hitch a ride into town. There is no water or electricity network here, so houses are powered with generators if residents can afford it. If not, they go without. "Water and electricity have become luxury products in Chad," said Ngargoto, who plans to build a house in this neighborhood when he can afford it.

Getting worse

Chad's expat population has grown in the last decade with the development of the oil sector, the military operation against Boko Haram and the humanitarian crisis that came with it, said Paul Melly, a consulting fellow at London-based think tank Chatham House. These changes "put much more pressure on the available space that expatriate people would consider acceptable or secure," he said, raising prices and pushing poor people further out.

Private developers are generally keener to build luxury apartments than affordable housing if there is someone to pay for it, which expats are, said Nakamura. "The formal housing supply is very limited in many African cities, so for ordinary people there is no chance to live in decent, non-slum housing," he said. Transport can also become expensive because it is limited and inefficient in fast-growing cities, he added. "Without developing more adequate infrastructure, there's no way cost of living can be reduced in the future," said Nakamura.—Reuters