

International

Coronavirus stalks cells of Cameroon's crowded jails

Overcrowding and poor sanitation leave inmates vulnerable

DAKAR: On the morning of April 24, Fritz Takang became so breathless he could barely walk across the cramped cell he shared with 60 inmates at the main prison in Cameroon's capital, Yaounde. That night, he said, he was evacuated with five others to an apartment complex that was being used to quarantine suspected COVID-19 cases. Near dawn the following morning, Takang, 48, heard a fellow inmate in distress in a neighboring room. With no doctors present, he said, he went to the man's bedside and laid a hand on his feverish forehead. Moments later, the man died. "I prayed for him before the last breath," Takang, a pastor, said. "I asked God to soften his pain."

Correctional facilities worldwide have been fertile ground for COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus. Africa's prison population of more than one million is especially vulnerable because of overcrowding, malnutrition and limited healthcare, health experts say. Patchy testing and reporting have frustrated efforts to track and contain its spread - both behind bars and in the community. Authorities in Togo, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa and Kenya have reported outbreaks in their prisons.

Cameroon's government has not publicly acknowledged infections inside its correctional facilities, although President Paul Biya signed a decree on April 15 to de-congest prisons in an effort to contain the virus. About 1,800 inmates were freed by May 8,

according to preliminary figures from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The government has not provided numbers. Hundreds of cases of COVID-19 were recorded among the inmates released from five prisons dotted across Cameroon's central region in April, according to government data seen by Reuters which has not been made public.

Some were allowed home before their test results came in, while others were released with little or no screening to determine if they could be at risk of spreading the virus into the community. Yaounde Central Prison, where Takang is held, was the worst hit, according to the data. The prison did not reply to requests for comment. Behind its mouldy walls, the virus appears to have swept through packed, squalid cells, overwhelming its ill-equipped infirmary, according to interviews with over a dozen current and former inmates, four prison officials and two lawyers.

Some asked not to be identified for fear of reprisals. Prisoners are not officially allowed to possess phones, but many do. More than 31 inmates have died there since the beginning of April, compared with the usual one or two a month, a senior prison official told Reuters, adding that none were tested for COVID-19. A Cameroon health ministry spokesman declined to comment, as did officials at the prison authority and a leading official in the coronavirus re-

sponse. The justice and communications ministries did not respond to questions sent via Whatsapp, email and in person.

Two sources present at recent health ministry briefings that were not open to the press said the government has made efforts to stem the spread of the virus in prisons, often struggling with limited resources and manpower. "I am sure a thousand people are infected," Takang said in a croaky voice from an isolation bed at the Cameroonian Presbyterian Church Hospital in Yaounde, where he was taken on April 25. "You cannot leave your room without passing a hundred people. It is a horror."

'Ticking time bomb'

The inmate population exceeds prison capacity in 42 of the 47 African countries and territories where data is available, according to the World Prison Brief, a database compiled by the Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research (ICPR) at Birkbeck, University of London. In Europe, prisons are over-full in 17 of 57 countries and territories. "This is a ticking time bomb. Prisons in Africa are already struggling to provide the most elementary standards of sanitation," said Catherine Heard, director of the World Prison Research Program at ICPR.

Cameroon has around 15,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19, one of the worst infection rates in sub-

Saharan Africa, with more than 350 deaths. Of 832 samples collected from inmates released from five prisons in April, 358 tested positive for COVID-19, according to the unpublished government data - 16% of the national total at the beginning of May.

The majority of positive samples came from Yaounde Central Prison, Cameroon's largest, where the infection rate of those released and tested was 58%. Its population is still around 3,000, three times capacity, said the senior prison official. Many who tested positive were quarantined. But dozens were allowed home before their results came back or without being tested, according to three prisoners released in April and May, and a guard who oversaw releases. "I signed my release papers; they opened the gates and let us out," said one inmate who said he was freed on May 22 with 15 others without testing. Others fled quarantine, the guard said. He could not say how many.

Crammed cells

Takang spent two weeks in hospital before returning to prison. A vocal supporter of Cameroon's Anglophone separatist movement, he has been confined there for over a year on charges of sponsoring terrorism, which he denies. His trial is ongoing. His test result for COVID-19, seen by Reuters, was negative. —Reuters

George Floyd said officers would 'kill' him: New recording

WASHINGTON: George Floyd said he couldn't breathe more than 20 times, called out for his children and late mother and said officers would "kill" him before he died in Minneapolis police custody, new evidence showed. Floyd, a black man, died on May 25 when a white police officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes. His death has unleashed a massive wave of protests against systemic racism and police brutality in the United States and inspired demos across the world.

Video of his death went viral and showed Floyd shouting "I can't breathe" and calling for his mother as he suffocated. But transcripts of the police officers' body camera footage, filed Tuesday in Minnesota state court by Thomas Lane, one of the officers involved in Floyd's death, has revealed new details about his final moments. When the officers first arrested him, Floyd begged them not to put him in the police car, telling them he was claustrophobic and in physical distress.

As they tried to force him into the car, Floyd cried out that he couldn't breathe and was "going to die in here." Later, according to the transcript, he said, "Momma, I love you. Tell my kids I love them. I'm dead." He called for his mother and children several more times. Throughout his arrest, Floyd said "I can't breathe" more than 20 times. The officers can be heard telling him to "relax," and that he was doing "fine" and "talking fine." At one point, as Floyd insisted they were going to kill him, officer Derek Chauvin shouted, "Then stop talking, stop yelling, it takes a heck of a lot of oxygen to talk."



ST ANTHONY: Demonstrators hold up banners bearing the likenesses of Philando Castile and George Floyd during a protest march in St. Anthony, Minnesota. —AFP

According to the transcript, Floyd's last words were, "They're going to kill me. They're going to kill me. I can't breathe." The transcript was submitted Tuesday by Lane to have the charges that he aided and abetted in Floyd's murder thrown out by a judge. He and the other three officers involved - Chauvin, Tou Thao and Alexander Kueng - were all fired from the Minneapolis police force one day after Floyd's death and charged in his murder. They each face up to 40 years behind bars.

Chauvin, who knelt on the handcuffed 46-year-old's neck, faces second and third-degree murder charges. Thao and Kueng, like Lane, have been charged with aiding and abetting a murder. The bystander video of Floyd's death stunned and horrified Americans, igniting protests and riots in cities across the country and sparking a national debate on racism and police violence. —AFP

Death of black teen in juvenile facility sparks outrage

WASHINGTON: A viral video showing a black teen losing consciousness while being choked by staff members of a juvenile delinquency center sparked outrage Wednesday, as anti-racism protests continue to rage across the United States. Cornelius Fredericks, 16, died May 1, two days after being pinned to the ground by staff at Lakeside Academy - a residential treatment for young adults in Kalamazoo, Michigan - for having thrown a sandwich at another boy in the cafeteria. In the video, captured by surveillance cameras, Fredericks throws the sandwich and then is thrown to the ground by several men, who use their weight to subdue him. After 10 minutes, Fredericks appears unconscious. Staff members attempted CPR before calling for medical help.

His death recalls that of George Floyd, an unarmed black man killed by a white Minneapolis police officer on May 25 during an arrest that was filmed and spread on social media. Floyd's death has unleashed a massive wave of anger and protests against systemic racism and police brutality. The "horrific video" of Fredericks's death reveals a "culture of fear and abuse" at Lakeside Academy, where "suffocation is a regular practice... as a form of discipline," the lawyer for Fredericks's family, Geoffrey Fieger, said Tuesday while making the video public.

Fredericks "was executed on April 29 for the crime of throwing a sandwich," Fieger said. The seven staff members who pinned him down "deprived him of oxygen and his brain suffered irreversible damage." Two of instructors and one nurse were charged with involuntary manslaughter and child abuse. —AFP