



Among other rights, Prisons enjoy freedom of worship

Prisons makes progress on human rights

By Geoffrey Mutegeki

The Uganda Prisons mission is to provide safe, secure and humane custody for offenders, while placing human rights at the centre of their correctional programmes.

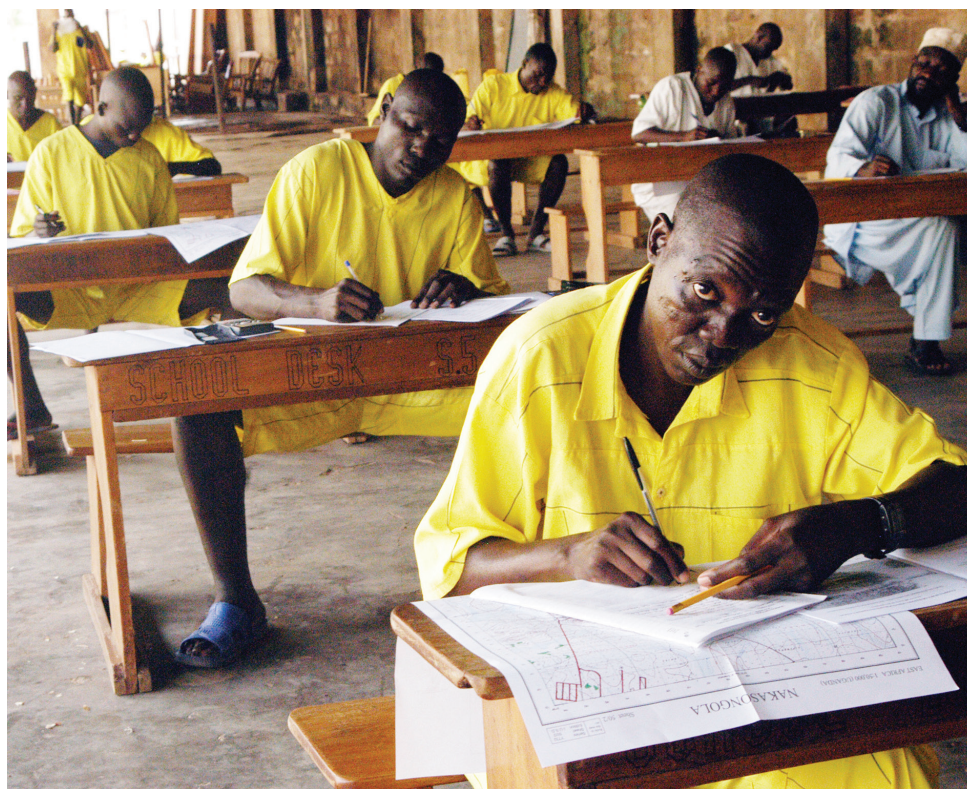
This mission was coined after the framers realised that violation of prisoners' rights had no place in the current world, where human rights is at the centre of everything. It is also in line with Chapter four of the Uganda Constitution and the Prison Act 2006, which clearly elaborate on how human rights should be approached.

Although abuse of human rights has not been completely wiped out within the Prisons, Frank Baine, the spokesperson, says a lot of effort is being made towards making things right.

"We are not what we used to be. At the moment, we are more cautious about people's rights because being a prisoner does not mean deprivation of your human rights," Baine says.

The service has a department concerned with human rights that makes sure prison staff observe human rights. Prisons were also at the forefront of the elimination of the death penalty.

Baine says Uganda Prisons used to be ranked highly among the top human rights



The Prisons training school teaches a module on human rights

offenders in the country because their staff were not trained on human rights and many prisons were still under the local governments.

"All our staff are now trained on human rights, even inmates have been sensitised about human rights, which has helped to address the issue of abuse," Baine says.

Teach human rights

To make it part of the system, a module on human rights was introduced at the prisons

training schools.

"Everyone who goes through the Prisons training school is taught about human rights so that they know what they are going to do. It is not like in the past, where they learnt on the job," Baine says.

At every prison, two human rights committees have been formed; one for staff and another for inmates.

Torture, which was one of the main abuses, has also been eliminated in the prisons. This was made possible by, among

other factors, making staff accountable individually on the offence committed.

Unlike in the past, accessing prison by human rights inspection bodies was not easy. Various human rights organisation access prisons for inspection in all the 249 prisons countrywide.

Prison banned corporal punishments, which were used to torture inmates.

"We used to manage with batons and *kiboko*, but now we negotiate with prisoners

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because we aim at correcting them," Baine says.

He explains that the Prisons service wants to ensure that prisons are free from human rights violations.

"Human rights are beyond torture. So, we need to put in place facilities. We have eliminated the bucket system and more health services," Baine says.

On HIV/AIDS, Baine says over 2,000 inmates living with HIV are able to access ARV's, while those who have other ailments also get treatment.

The establishment of the publicity office, according to Baine, is also one of the milestones towards the fight against human rights abuse.

"We are now able to interact with the public, which can easily report abuses and through other interactions,

we are able to address the problem," Baine says.

On prisoners working in private or public fields, Baine says this has nothing to do with human rights abuse, unless the staff beats or tortures them.

"If you, a free person is supposed to work, why is it bad for a prisoner to work? Work on private or public place is catered for in the Prisons Act 2006," Baine says.

Challenges

However, all is not gold, the prisons have several challenges towards wiping out abuse of human rights.

The biggest challenge, according to Baine, is the mindset of society, who think prisoners should be mistreated.

"Even the people we recruit come with the same mindset. They think prison is a place where one should be made to suffer, but we are fighting that mindset," Baine says.

He highlighted that today, it is possible for a prisoner to get food from outside if they feel they cannot eat from the prison.

The delays in the justice system is also one of the challenges faced.

"Staying long on remand and congestion are also abuses, but all these can be avoided if we harmonise our justice system to ensure there are no delays," Baine says.

The Prisons still lack good healthcare services, enough funding and staff welfare is still poor.