

# HIV/Aids Serious Threat in Prisons

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As in many other countries, HIV/AIDS is a serious threat to Mozambique's prison population, Justice Minister Benvinda Levy warned on Monday, at the opening in Maputo of a National Seminar on Prison Health. She pointed out that international statistics show a rate of HIV prevalence inside prisons ranging from twice to 50 times the rate among the general population. "This presents significant challenges to the prison and public health authorities", she said.

The current size of the Mozambican prison population is around 14,000. This is 67 per 100,000 inhabitants, a fairly low rate by international standards. (By comparison, the United States incarcerates over 2.1 million of its citizens, a prison rate of 738 per 100,000).

But Mozambique's prisons date from the colonial era. The infrastructure is crumbling and most of the prisons are overcrowded, which creates conditions favourable to the spread of disease.

The prisons, Levy said, provide an environment where unprotected sexual relations take place, with or without consent. (In most cases, this must refer to homosexual relations, a subject still surrounded by taboos). Other factors involved in the spread of disease are the sharing of needles to inject drugs, the general climate of violence, tension and fear, and the lack of adequate health installations in the prisons.

International studies show that the prison population is largely drawn from the most vulnerable sectors of the population, from the poor and the unemployed, who were already exposed to multiple risks before they entered prison. "The conditions in which these prisoners are confined and the overcrowding increase still further vulnerability to disease, which is also worsened by the shortage of food that the prisons are able to provide", said Levy.

The seminar is intended to contribute to greater understanding and dialogue between the governmental and non-governmental institutions involved in prison health, and to ensure greater coordination between the prison and public health services.

Gina Cumba, the head of the medical department in the prison service, told reporters that the Health Ministry will provide specialist training for prison medical staff, so that they will be better equipped to deal with the main health problems in the jails.

"The survey of the training needs for the health professionals who will join the prison staff has already been undertaken", said Cumba. "It must now be discussed between the Health and Justice Ministries". A memorandum of understanding between the two ministries will soon be signed, forming the basis for their cooperation in prison health.

The Health Ministry carried out one study on HIV prevalence in the prisons in 2002. This showed that about 30 per cent of prisoners were HIV-positive. Currently the general rate of HIV infection among the population aged between 15 and 49 is 16 per cent.

The fight against HIV/AIDS is one of the priority areas of Millennium Development Goals. (Adapted from AIM)