



# INTERNATIONAL PRISON NEWS DIGEST

## 33<sup>rd</sup> Edition – May - June 2016

Welcome to the thirty third edition of the International Prison News Digest, a selection of news items from around the world on prison and the use of imprisonment. We aim in the Digest to cover all regions and include new developments in policy and practice, as well as information from official and intergovernmental bodies. The Digest is produced bi-monthly and this issue covers the period from 1 May to 30 June 2016. Please click on the blue highlighted words to access the news reports.

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### **Prison populations**

Government bodies have failed to create more prison space in [Colombia](#) and overcrowding is reaching desperate levels, according to local media. At the moment the country's prisons have capacity for roughly 80,000 prisoners. However, nearly 122,000 prisoners are living in them, meaning that overcrowding of prison space has exceeded 50%. In some prisons the conditions are desperate, with overcrowding of over 400%. More than four years ago the government created USPEC, a body to tackle the overcrowding problem. USPEC planned to have built six new mega prisons over the last three years with room for 84,500 more prisoners. They also sought to improve living conditions in the existing prisons. Yet reports say that due to a mixture of corruption and incompetence, almost none of their projects have been completed, and none of their targets have been met.

[Romania](#) has made progress in improving conditions of detention in the country but much remains to be done, including reducing overcrowding in prisons and other places where people are deprived of their liberty, UN experts have said. The comments came at the end of a visit to Romania by the UN Subcommittee for Prevention of Torture (SPT). "We appreciate the efforts Romania has made and we trust that the continued and increased use of alternatives to detention will continue to have an impact on the number of pre-trial detainees," said the delegation head. "The situation of detained people belonging to vulnerable groups, including children, young people aged 18 to 21, women, persons with mental and physical disabilities, elderly people and those from minorities requires very close

attention and protection measures,” she noted.

[Russia](#)'s Federal Penitentiary Service (FPS) has repeatedly asked officials to make fewer arrests in a bid to ease prison overcrowding, Russian newspaper Kommersant reported. Writing on her blog, member of Moscow's Public Supervisory Commission Anna Karetnikova said that the FPS still had not received a reply from either the police or court officials. The situation in the city's already overcrowded jails has dramatically worsened in May, she wrote, with some individual prison cells currently 13 prisoners over capacity. In her blog, she described her visit to a Moscow's women's detention centre in late April. She wrote that overcrowding and a lack of beds was forcing prisoners to sleep on the floor. The jail's administration ignored all complaints from prisoners and in some cases deliberately made their living conditions worse, she said. She also wrote that prisoners lacked proper access to medical care, including those with obvious health problems.

[Zimbabwe](#) has pardoned 2,000 prisoners to make space in its overcrowded jails, with authorities appealing to the released prisoners not to return to a life of crime, according to state media. All male prisoners under the age of 18 and all female prisoners, except two who are serving life sentences, were released, the Herald newspaper reported. The pardon was also extended to terminally-ill prisoners and those sentenced to less than three years who had served at least a quarter of their time. The amnesty does not apply to prisoners jailed for murder, treason, rape, armed robbery, car-jacking or sexual offences.

A report published by the [US](#) based Sentencing Project analysed racial disparities within state prisons and compared those findings to the US census. Black Americans were incarcerated in state prisons at an average rate of 5.1 times that of white Americans, the report said, and in some states that rate was 10 times or more. The US is 63.7% non-Hispanic white, 12.2% black, 8.7% Hispanic white and 0.4% Hispanic black, according to the most recent census. The research found that in five states, the disparity rate was more than double the average. New Jersey had the highest, with a ratio of 12.2 black people to one white person in its prison system, followed by Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota and Vermont. Overall, Oklahoma had the highest rate of black people incarcerated with 2,625 black prisoners per 100,000 residents. Oklahoma is 7.7% black. Among black men in 11 states, at least 1 in 20 were in a state prison. Hawaii, which is 2.5% black, had the lowest incarceration rate among black people (585 per 100,000), and the lowest ratio – 2.4 black Americans to 1 white – in its prisons.

The latest report from the [Irish](#) Prison Service shows that there was almost a 9% increase in the number of people sent to prison last year. A total of 13,987 people were given a prison sentence in 2015, up from 12,853 in the previous year. The highest proportion of these – more than 4,700 – were due to road and traffic offences, while more than 1,600 of the sentences were for offences against the state or organised crime. Justice Minister Frances Fitzgerald also launched a strategic plan to improve the prison service from now until 2021, and acknowledged “very serious issues” needed to be addressed.

## **Treatment of prisoners**

[European](#) prisons are increasingly resorting to solitary confinement to counteract the threat of terrorism, despite warnings about its impact, defence lawyers and human rights advocates say. France, Belgium and the Netherlands are all deploying solitary and “small-group isolation” on suspected and convicted terrorists to prevent radicalisation of prisoners. Human rights lawyers point to the psychological and physical consequences of isolation, and say that its use may amount to torture or ill-treatment. Additional concerns have been expressed about the big rise in the use of small-group isolation in Europe, in which people are segregated from the general population, although not necessarily from each other. Prison isolation may not only be inhumane, but also ineffective. Critics say the practice may make people more vulnerable to extremist ideas, and stress that eliminating communication among prisoners is often impossible.

In the [US](#), the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors has agreed to outlaw solitary confinement for young offenders in the country’s largest juvenile justice system, meaning 1,200 juveniles will be kept out of dirty and “deplorable” restrictive housing in 16 juvenile halls and camps from September. Criminal justice advocates and scientists have long considered solitary confinement a form of psychological torture that also causes damage to the brain. Supervisors Hilda Solis and Sheila Kuehl proposed the ban, citing atrocious conditions and research that says solitary reduces the likelihood of juveniles’ rehabilitation. Young people who previously spent hours, days, and years in solitary described their experiences, before the Board voted unanimously to eliminate the practice.

A court has ordered [Belgium](#) to pay 300 euros per day to 21 prisoners. According to the complaining prisoners, they haven’t received any minimum service since a strike by prison guards started on 25 April. Their lawyers explained to the court that family visits are now prevented, there is no regular access to showers and it has become impossible to purchase hygiene products and other basic necessities. Furthermore, the distribution of food has also become random, activities are eliminated or reduced, it’s impossible to make phone calls and contacts with lawyers are scarce. The court ruling was to the benefit of the prisoners and sentenced the state to pay a penalty of 300 euros per day to each complainant if the government does not guarantee the service prisoners are entitled to.

In response to a request by the United Nations' Committee Against Torture (CAT) that Israel criminalize torture, [Israel](#)'s attorney general confirmed that new legislation is being drafted that would outlaw the torture of suspects during interrogation. CAT’s chairman, Jen Modvig, strongly recommended that Israel "introduce the crime of torture as defined in the convention" because there has not been any "penalty...commensurate with the seriousness of the crime" defined in Israeli legislation.

Prisoners on death row in [India](#) are living in inhumane conditions, and facing unfair trials and horrific acts of police torture, according to a new study released by the Death Penalty Research Project in Delhi. The study is based on interviews with 373 of the 385 prisoners believed to be on death row in India and offers a harrowing insight into the unbearable uncertainty the prisoners face and the horrific conditions they have to live in as they wait for judges to decide their fate. The study is a window into the lengthy, bureaucratic judicial process in India. It shows that for those currently on death row, there was an average of five years between arrest and sentencing. Death sentences are handed down without

consistency, forcing prisoners into an endless system of appeals, during which they often have little information about the progress of the cases against them. Many are unable to meet their lawyers and are not informed about the status of proceedings. Torture, solitary confinement and “violent investigation techniques” are also endemic and a host of social and economic factors can determine how a person is treated in jail and the sentence they get. Three out of four death row prisoners were classed as “economically vulnerable” and 42% belonged to the “scheduled castes”, considered to be lower down in the caste system.

The [Sri Lankan](#) Government says it is committed to making the prison system more humane and effective by adhering to the UN international standards. The Minister of Prison Reforms Rehabilitation, Resettlement and Hindu Religious Affairs said the Ministry is taking steps to provide water, sanitation, adequate medical care and other basic needs for the prisoners in accordance with the minimum requirements prescribed by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). “Using modern technology for security measures in prisons, professionalising the staff at the Prisons Department, improving the rehabilitation programmes provided for prisoners are the other areas that we are focusing on to improve the standards of the prisons system in this country,” he added.

Dozens of prisoners serving life sentences in [Georgian](#) prisons have started a hunger protest to demand amendments to the country's 2012 amnesty law. Georgia's Ministry for Corrections said that 42 prisoners in Gldani prison near Tbilisi were demanding that the amnesty law be changed so that those facing life in prison can have their sentences reduced along with other prisoners. According to the ministry, all those taking part in the hunger strike were being monitored by prison staff. The law on amnesty, adopted by Georgia's parliament in 2012, reduced the prison sentences of prisoners by 25 percent. But the language of the amnesty law does not allow for reduced sentences for those imprisoned for life.

[El Salvador](#)'s high court has declared conditions in the country's overcrowded prisons unconstitutional in a ruling with implications for the government's hard line policies aimed at defeating gangs. The Supreme Court of Justice ruling said conditions in prisons around the country “violate the fundamental right of personal integrity” of prisoners. The court's press release said that on average, 30 to 40 prisoners are housed in a space measuring 10.2 square meters. That averages out to about 0.28 square meters (3 square feet) per person. The inhumane conditions violate Article 11 of El Salvador's constitution, which gives prisoners the right to dignified detention. The court ordered the construction of new facilities as well as the adaptation of existing prisons to better accommodate prisoners.

Members of the judicial police in Tripoli, [Libya](#), who are responsible for guarding jails, have announced a 24-hour strike and have threatened to release all their prisoners because they say there is no money to pay for food supplies for the prisoners. In a statement, the judicial police media office said that the decision had been made at a meeting of Tripoli prison managers. With no money coming in, debts had built up and they were unable to pay the catering companies which supply the prisons. It is not clear how serious the threat is. However, the judicial police stated clearly that they would not be held responsible for expected riots in the prisons if there were no food. If bloodshed and violence were to be avoided, they said, they would have to open the doors and let the prisoners go free.

## Prison Health

The [Italian](#) Justice Minister has launched a plan to stem prison suicides, which he called a "worrying and intolerable phenomenon". The Minister said he had already issued a directive aimed at "raising the level of attention, boosting at the same time the measures that in each prison are already taken to prevent self-harming". The plan aims to gather, process and publish data on the phenomenon and the measures taken to stem it.

The [Colombian](#) Justice Minister has declared a state of emergency inside the country's jails over the critical healthcare situation of prisoners. The decree, which will expire at the end of the calendar year, allows prison officials to take emergency measures to attend to the problems plaguing many Colombian prisoners, such as a lack of medicine and healthcare personnel. The Colombian Ombudsperson found that of Colombia's 134 prisons and jails, 55 percent do not dispense medicine and nearly 10,000 patients have not received requested care. There is only one doctor for every 496 prisoners.

The [New Zealand](#) Corrections Department is to receive \$14 million to help offenders with mental health issues. The money will be used to enhance mental health services for offenders in prison and for those released in the community over the next two years. A Corrections study found that 62 percent of prisoners had some form of mental health or substance abuse disorder in the last 12 months, and 20 percent had both these disorders. The disorders often went undetected or were not treated properly. The new funding will help contract mental health clinicians and support workers to work with offenders in prison and in the community. It will also be used on supported accommodation for some offenders, as well as more social workers and counsellors, and a wraparound post-release support service for prisoners and their families with multiple mental health needs.

There was a significant increase last year in the number of prisoners dying in [Irish](#) prisons or while on temporary release. According to unreleased figures seen by The Irish Times, 22 people died last year while in the custody of the Irish Prison Service. This compares to 14 each for 2014 and 2013. All deaths of prisoners, either in the country's 14 prisons or while on temporary release, are investigated by the Inspector of Prisons, Judge Michael Reilly. Judge Reilly said investigations are still continuing into 10 of the 22 deaths last year. Of the 12 investigation reports released so far, six related to deaths on temporary release. Two prisoners died of overdoses shortly after being freed, while another was shot dead shortly after release. Of the deaths in prisons, the judge found one prisoner likely took his own life, four died from overdoses and two died from physical illnesses.

## Prison violence

At least 60,000 people have died in [Syrian](#) government jails during the five-year civil war, a monitoring group has said. "No fewer than 60,000 detainees were martyred ... either as a result of direct bodily torture, or denial of food and medicine" the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, citing sources in the Syrian government's security apparatus. The Observatory's director, Rami Abdulrahman, said it had arrived at the number by adding up death tolls provided by sources in several Syrian jails and security agencies.

Three prisoners were killed after a gang ordered the assassination of one of them at a [Mexican](#) prison where 49 others died in a brawl in February, authorities said. Another 19 were injured at the Topo Chico prison, including five seriously. Some 25 state police officers threw tear gas at the prisoners to bring the situation under control. None of the officers were hurt. The violence erupted after a gang ordered the murder of a prison leader, Javier Orlando Galindo, because he failed to send money to the criminal group outside the penitentiary, according to the state's interior secretary said. Weeks later three prisoners escaped following a riot and fire at a prison near [Mexico](#) City. According to officials, 10 prisoners and 7 police officers were injured in the riot.

Around a hundred prisoners were transferred to other prisons following a riot at Merksplas prison in [Belgium](#). "The night walk around took place at 7.30pm on Saturday, and 200 didn't want to go back", the mayor of Merksplas said. "Prisoners started fires, walls were torn down, windows were broken, and doors were forced open. Some of the blocks are unusable, and will be for several months". "I've never seen this before", he added. "A fire was started when people were still in their cells. This is a serious offense, and there will no doubt be an investigation. Luckily, only two prisoners needed medical attention, for smoke inhalation". Federal and local police, backed by special intervention units, finally rounded up the rebelling prisoners in a corner of the walking zone, so they could take them all back at once.

## **Developments in rehabilitation**

The National Open University of [Nigeria](#) (NOUN) has granted a 100 per cent fee waiver to prisoners who want to participate in education across the country. The Vice-Chancellor of the university stated that the waiver, which before now was pegged at 50 per cent, would enable the prisoners to have unfettered access to quality education and also encourage others to take advantage of this initiative to acquire education. He said, "Having suffered abandonment by relatives, emotional and physical confinement, prisoners would see such a gesture from NOUN as a measure meant to reduce the burden on them and to provide the platform to improve and make themselves better citizens."

The [US](#) Justice Department's Office of Justice Programs is eschewing the terms "felon" and "convict" when officials refer to individuals convicted of crimes, opting instead for less "disparaging labels," according to Assistant Attorney General Karol Mason. The Office of Justice Programs plans to substitute terminology such as "person who committed a crime" and "individual who was incarcerated" in speeches and other communications as part of an effort to remove barriers that officials say hinder progress of those who re-enter society after completing their prison sentences. "I have come to believe that we have a responsibility to reduce not only the physical but also the psychological barriers to reintegration," Ms. Mason wrote in a guest post for The Washington Post. "The labels we affix to those who have served time can drain their sense of self-worth and perpetuate a cycle of crime, the very thing reentry programs are designed to prevent." The announcement follows a series of initiatives introduced as part of the Justice Department's first National Reentry Week, through which law enforcement officials hope to reduce recidivism by changing features of the criminal justice system.



In addition, the Obama administration has rolled out a series of education and work training initiatives focused on helping convicted criminals in the [US](#) avoid returning to prison, part of President Barack Obama's legacy-shaping effort to overhaul the U.S. criminal justice system as he prepares to leave office. The measures include a program that will link 67 colleges and universities with 141 correctional facilities to provide education and training to about 12,000 prisoners. The program will offer federal Pell grants to prisoners, with an emphasis on prisoners set to be released within five years of starting classes. Other programs unveiled will offer \$31 million in grants for organisations to offer occupational training and apprenticeship opportunities for young adults and more than \$5 million to organisations that help prisoners prepare for employment.

[Cambodia](#)'s prison libraries are set to receive an extra \$600,000 in funding from the French Agency for Development and literacy NGO Sipar. The director of Sipar said the extra funding will be spread out over three years and enhance 26 prison libraries across 10 provinces, as well as provide literacy classes and rehabilitation services such as vocational training. "We contribute to provide education to them [prisoners]," he said, adding that the programme's purpose is to educate prisoners to prevent them reoffending.

A judge in Madrid, [Spain](#), has ordered a company to rehire an employee it had fired because he spent two years in prison, arguing that the decision contravened the ex-prisoner's right to rehabilitation in society. In his judgment, the judge backed the employee's claim to have his job as a warehouse operative given back to him, as well as back pay to cover the period since he was released in February. The judge ruled that it was clear the only reason the man, identified as D.A., was fired was the fact that he had been sent to prison. "Not allowing back to work someone who has been convicted and jailed, thus paying for the crime committed, constitutes discriminatory conduct which is incompatible with [...] the Constitution," the judge wrote.

A pilot program backed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is providing mobile legal aid to prisoners in five [Vietnamese](#) prisons to help improve their social re-integration once they are released. In Vietnam, prisoners who are released back into the community after long prison sentences usually face a wide variety of problems, many of which the UNDP believes can be addressed with improved access to legal services. Difficulties with identity cards, clearing criminal records, registering household books, and family issues are common problems," said Scott Ciment, UNDP policy advisor for rule of law, adding that some prisoners even have difficulties reading and writing. Ciment said the program is designed to help prisoners with social re-integration by allowing law students, with support from professors and local lawyers, to provide basic legal information.

## **Sentencing and the law**

Stealing small amounts of food to stave off hunger is not a crime, [Italy](#)'s highest court of appeal has ruled. Judges overturned a theft conviction against Roman Ostriakov after he stole cheese and sausages worth €4.07 (£3; \$4.50) from a supermarket. Mr Ostriakov, a homeless man of Ukrainian background, had taken the food "in the face of the immediate

and essential need for nourishment", the court of cassation decided. Therefore it was not a crime, it said.

[India](#)'s top judges have decided to fast-track the cases of hundreds of thousands of pre-trial prisoners, many of whom have been in jail for periods longer than they would serve on being found guilty. Prisoners awaiting trial for more than 10 years will top the priority list. It is estimated that more than 280,000 people are awaiting trial across the country, constituting almost two-thirds of India's total prison population. The chief justices also decided to take up cases which have been pending for more than three years and establish a mechanism for the regular identification of pre-trial prisoners who have completed more than half of their maximum possible sentences. At least 18,000 cases have been pending for more than three years of which 80 percent of cases are concentrated in seven states. Out of these, 226 cases have been awaiting a verdict for more than 10 years.

Cases of people held behind bars for years before trial in the [European Union](#) continue to surface despite years of attempts at reform, London-based Fair Trials International says in a new report. Judges in EU countries routinely detain people in pre-trial detention even though it is supposed to be used only in exceptional circumstances, claims the study, which details the abuse and case history of people, some innocent, whose lives have been ruined. The 84-page study, co-funded by the EU commission, found that one in five people in the EU held in prison had yet to be convicted. That is over 120,000 people. The findings are drawn from interviewing 544 lawyers, 56 judges, and 45 prosecutors, spanning 10 EU states. Some 670 case files were reviewed and 242 hearings attended.

[Mexico](#)'s new accusatory justice system, which has been in the works for eight years and is due to be implemented in June, needs 11 more years to take hold properly, according to a new study. Implementation of the criminal justice reform, which has a constitutional deadline of June 18, has introduced oral trials and aims to overhaul an antiquated, dysfunctional system that leaves some perpetrators unpunished and suspects languishing in prison awaiting trial for years. However, the study by Mexican think tank CIDAC said that, after the implementation deadline, the justice system would still be held back by challenges such as training police to conduct high-quality investigations. "Nationally, it is estimated that it will take us eleven years on average to reach the optimum level for the SJP (accusatory system) to be operating effectively and properly," the CIDAC report said.

The [Ghanaian](#) Supreme Court has ruled that people accused of crimes such as murder, rape and narcotics can henceforth be granted bail, striking down a nearly 60-year-old law. The judgement comes more than one year after private legal practitioner, Martin Kpebu, filed a suit asking the Court to declare that Section 96(7) of the Criminal Procedure and Juvenile Justice Act is unconstitutional. He told a newspaper that if a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty, then there is no need for the accused to be kept on remand while the case is tried. The Act on non-bailable offences is the reason why many are languishing in prison cells for years even though they are presumed innocent. Markin Kpebu described it as "one of the most oppressive laws on our statute books". The move is expected to greatly decongest Ghana's prisons.



The government of [Nepal](#) has amended the 1963 Prison Regulation so prisoners who have demonstrated good conduct can be released after serving 40 percent of their sentence. As per the amendment, the government may waive the remaining jail term of eligible prisoners, who must have been convicted of petty crimes and have already served at least 40 percent of the jail term, if they have demonstrated good conduct in prison. Previously, pardon was granted only to prisoners who completed at least half their jail sentence. In addition, Rule 29 (2a) has been amended so that up to 75 per cent of the remaining terms of prisoners who are above 65 years of age and have demonstrated good conduct may be commuted. Previously the age limit was 70. The pardon aims to reduce pressure on overcrowded prisons.

More than 4,300 [US](#) federal prisoners were kept in prison beyond their scheduled release dates from 2009 to 2014 — some of them for an extra year or more, according to a report released by the Justice Department's director general that highlighted widespread confusion in the prison system. While it is unusual for a prisoner to be held past his sentence, the consequences "can be extraordinarily serious," the report said. The delayed releases "deprive prisoners of their liberty," and have led to millions of dollars in added prison costs and legal settlements with former prisoners, it concluded. The investigation found that in the most egregious cases, avoidable errors by prison staffers led to 152 prisoners being imprisoned beyond their release dates. In a number of cases blamed on staff errors, prison officials failed to properly give prisoners credit for time they had spent behind bars before their sentencing or they misinterpreted the terms of the sentence imposed by the judge, the report said. The bulk of these cases led to prisoners being kept behind bars for up to an additional month, but 61 were held for an extra month or longer, and three prisoners were kept for more than a year beyond their scheduled release. In nearly 4,200 other cases, prisoners were held for extra time for reasons that prison officials said were beyond their control, such as a judge's shortening a prisoner's sentence to less than the time he had served, or a state or local court's imposing a sentence that was not included in the federal system.

[Portugal](#)'s minister of justice has announced plans to reopen 19 court-houses that had been closed by the previous government, most of them located in rural areas with ageing populations. Plans to reopen the 19 court houses are outlined in a document submitted by the minister to members of parliament's committee on constitutional affairs, rights, freedoms and guarantees. According to the document the aim of the Ministry of Justice in reopening the courts is to bring justice closer to citizens. The same applies to another measure requiring that judicial services be offered in 27 "proximity sections" created by the previous government to provide a limited service only. The reopening of the 19 court houses is aimed at "combatting the desertification of the interior" and "facilitating the access of residents to essential judicial services".

The [Japanese](#) Diet has passed an amendment mandating for the first time the recording of police interrogations as well as changes to the existing wiretap law and the adoption of a plea bargain system, in reforms representing a significant turning point in Japan's criminal justice system. The measures are an attempt to bring transparency to the nation's notoriously opaque judicial process. Under the new requirements, police and prosecutors will be obliged for the first time to videotape certain criminal interrogations in a bid to

prevent the authorities from eliciting coerced confessions. With the introduction of the plea bargain system, the authorities will be allowed to offer those accused of drug trafficking and white-collar crimes, such as bribery and tax evasion, special deals to encourage them to divulge information on accomplices, including ringleaders, in exchange for lighter sentences or dropped charges. Included in the new laws are penalties that can be applied if a suspect provides false leads and a requirement that such negotiations take place in the presence of the suspect's lawyer.

Nearly half the prisoners serving unlimited sentences of life imprisonment or preventive detention in [New Zealand](#) have been released on parole. Figures released by the Corrections Department under the Official Information Act reveal that 316 prisoners sentenced to life imprisonment have been granted parole between June 2002 and March this year. A further 60 sentenced to preventive detention have been granted parole over the same period. Three prisoners sentenced to both life and preventive detention were granted parole over the period. Those 379 paroled offenders account for nearly half the 830 prisoners presently serving sentences of life or preventive detention (299 on preventive detention, 531 life imprisonment, 19 both).

## **Prison policy**

The [New Zealand](#) Justice Minister has launched the "investment approach to justice", under which accounting firm PWC will help the Ministry of Justice develop statistical models to predict lifetime patterns of offending and victimisation, and help forecast future crime. The launch is part of the Government's "social investment" approach aimed at making better spending decisions using data on vulnerable people. The Minister said the focus was on stopping people from committing crimes, as much as dealing with them once they were in front of a judge. "By the time they're in court, it's a much harder life course to change around, so if all of the focus of this is what we can sentence people to in court, we're really missing the point."

[Canada](#) is prepared to join a key United Nations anti-torture agreement more than a decade after it was first passed. The UN's optional protocol to the convention against torture allows for the establishment of national and international systems for inspecting detention centres where torture often takes place in secrecy. A spokesperson for the Foreign Affairs Minister has now announced that the Trudeau government plans to ratify the protocol, saying "The minister just announced that we agree that the government of Canada should join this important protocol... We are taking the first step towards doing so by beginning formal consultations on the optional protocol with provincial and territorial governments."

The New South Wales government plans to build the biggest jail in [Australia](#) in southwestern Sydney and shut down the Long Bay Jail at Malabar to sell its seafront land. "Long Bay is a prime bit of real estate with close access to the eastern beaches, the airport and the city," The Corrective Services Minister said. "I've long held the view that prisoners should not have the enjoyment of a seaside setting." The new jail will accommodate up to 5000 prisoners, almost half of the state's record prison population of over 12,000.

[Belgium](#) called up the military to assist in prisons where guards went on strike over what they said was dangerously low staffing due to budget cuts. Six platoons of 30 soldiers were mobilised to help police and the Red Cross who were working in prisons in Brussels and the French-speaking region of Wallonia, where prison officers were striking. The justice ministry said that some of the mobilised soldiers had been deployed at the three largest prisons - two in Brussels and one near the city of Liege. Conditions in the prisons had worsened and some prisoners were not receiving certain basic rights such as showers, three meals a day, family visits and access to lawyers. Unions have said low staffing has limited access to courses and other activities that can help reduce violence and prevent prisoners from reoffending.

Correctional officers and staff at five prisons in Queensland, [Australia](#), walked off the job in response to the dangerous conditions they faced in overcrowded prisons. Staff at the correctional centres stopped work as workers at other statewide correctional centres held meetings outside shift hours in support of what they believe is an unfair and dangerous environment for prison staff. The Together Union industrial services director said it wasn't reasonable for staff to be directed to intervene in situations where they could be injured. "Every centre in the state is over capacity now and to be honest there is no answer around the corner in the foreseeable future," he said. "We are making do but we have prisoners sleeping on the floor, prisoners sleeping in cells that are being doubled up that were made for one person... That is increasing their stress, the tension there, and when that does boil over our members are at the front line of that, the number of assaults is rising across the board." The strikes meant prisoners were put into lockdown with management run on skeleton staff.

The Inspector of Prisons in [Ireland](#) has urged the Government to radically reform the Republic's prison system by bringing prisoner complaints under the remit of the Ombudsman and Information Commissioner. This would allow such complaints to be independently investigated. Currently, a panel of lawyers, appointed by the Irish Prison Service, is in place to investigate more serious complaints, with individual investigators assigned to each case as it arises. More minor complaints are dealt with internally by the prison service. The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture 10 years ago called on the Irish Government to introduce independent prisoner complaints oversight. The absence of such a system has put Ireland in breach of the United Nations "Nelson Mandela rules", which set out the minimum standard of treatment prisoners are entitled to.

Prisoners in [Finnish](#) prisons can purchase both inside and outside a prison using a pre-paid card, following the completion of a project to make electronic payments available to all prisoners, removing the need to handle cash. The pre-paid cards were deployed to Finland's prisons and their 3,000 prisoners (with the exception of prisoners in open prisons with existing bank cards). Prison personnel load a new prisoner's card with the cash funds they have on arrival, instead of storing that money in the prison. Subsequent payments to top up the card, with money from family members or authorities paying benefits, are paid to it directly using a personal IBAN code. This means Finnish prisons no longer accept cash from outside visitors. On the surface, the pre-paid cards work like any bank card, but they are not tied to a bank account and no interest is paid on the money. In addition, the card can only be used on payment terminals that can check the card's balance in real-time. After a

prisoner is released, any remaining credit on their card can be transferred to a nominated bank account.

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