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Mesa Internacional de Seguimiento al Coronavirus en las Prisiones
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Introducción y valoración general del tema

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Covid 19 is a unique pandemic which is already affecting the lives of all of us in every country in the world and will continue to do so for a long time to come.

In the closed world of the prison, health is fragile at all times and authorities around the world are attentive to the particular dangers of Covid 19 infection within prisons. There have already been instances of serious unrest in several countries. Only yesterday we heard of a major riot in La Modelo Prison in Bogotá which left 23 prisoners dead and many staff and prisoners injured. Last week there was a riot in a prison in northern Italy in which at least six prisoners died and a number of staff and prisoners were injured. These and similar incidents in other countries have been caused, at least in part, not by the pandemic itself but by fear and uncertainty of what *might* happen. That brings me to my first recommendation.

Management needs to provide good communication and information for both personnel and prisoners in order to reduce the spread of unfounded rumour and dangerous gossip. Part of the reason for the riots in prisons in Colombia, Italy and elsewhere appears to have been a reaction to the fact that prisoners did not properly understand why visits from family and friends were being suspended. Staff and prisoners should be provided on an ongoing basis with clear and factual information about the main issues and should be given advice about what is being done to alleviate the situation. It is very important to reduce the climate of fear in each prison and the tension which is inevitably experienced by both prisoners and personnel.

Many prisons are grossly overcrowded. That greatly increases the risk of contamination and the spread of infection. So, the second recommendation is to explore tactics to reduce overcrowding in the short term. A number of countries are already taking specific steps to tackle this. Some are focussing efforts on an immediate reduction in the number of pre-trial detainees (*preventivos*). In the

first place, for individuals whose cases have yet to be heard the relevant judicial authorities are being asked to consider all alternatives short of detention before trial. That could involve supervision in the community, or requiring accused persons to report at regular intervals to local police stations, or requiring them to wear electronic bracelets in countries where the necessary technology exists. At the same time, prison authorities are examining all the cases of current pre-trial detainees and, where appropriate, requesting the judicial authority to agree to temporary release under some of the above conditions. These matters will be particularly important in some of the countries in this region where up to 60% of all prisoners are pre-trial.

Some prison authorities are also examining the cases of prisoners who are serving short sentences as well as others who are coming to the end of their sentences, with a view to early executive release. In addition, there are specific groups who might be suitable for early release. These would include women and young prisoners as well as those who might be especially vulnerable on account of their age.

An added consideration is the fact that in several countries many prisoners will be released at the end of their sentences without any plan for where will live, with the prospect that they will be homeless, living on the streets. Such men and women are likely to be at greater personal risk of contracting coronavirus and of infecting others.

My third recommendation is the need to work closely with public health services. They should be able to provide advice about best practice, for example, in how to take basic precautions in respect of cleanliness and hygiene of the institution and of individuals, both of which are crucial for keeping infection to a minimum. They will also be able to advise on the advantages (and possible disadvantages) of transferring prisoners who are infected to specific prisons or to separate blocks within a prison. This may make it easier to concentrate personnel and other resources where they are most needed. Useful information on some of these matters has already been published by a number of governmental and international organisations such as the World Health Organisation and the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture has just published a statement of principles for managing the Covid 19 pandemic in prisons (CofE/CPT/Inf (2020) 13).

The fourth recommendation is that prison personnel need to be supported and protected. The good communication which is mentioned above will be crucial for their confidence (and may have an added benefit in reducing their sick absence). Staff who deal directly with prisoners may need to be given special clothing (Personal Protective Equipment) to protect them from contamination

and they should also have guaranteed access to cleaning and disinfecting materials. There may well be a need to readjust their attendance rosters to ensure that they have proper rest periods in between duty. In some countries arrangements are being made for other uniformed services to provide additional support in prisons.

I suggest that these four sets of recommendations can provide a solid basis for planning a strategy for managing this pandemic and I look forward to hearing the reports from other contributors about the practical steps which are already being taken to manage the coronavirus pandemic in prisons in this region.