



26 June 2020 - International day of support for victims of torture

Human rights and detention in the era of COVID-19

Vincennes, 26 June 2020 - On the occasion of this International Day of Support for Victims of Torture and in the context of the Covid-19 world pandemic, FIACAT wishes to denounce the serious impact of this crisis on people in detention and to recall the human rights violations that these people suffer on a daily basis.

While the coronavirus crisis has multiplied initiatives of international and national solidarity and caused a great deal of media coverage, it has also exacerbated the difficult living conditions of people deprived of their liberty and the human rights violations they suffer. The crisis has shed light on the shortcomings in places of detention in many countries. Promiscuity, aggravated by overcrowding, lack of hygiene and lack of staff making it impossible to respect basic sanitary measures have placed people deprived of their liberty in a position of great vulnerability and have greatly increased the risk of the virus spreading. Coupled with the high level of insalubrity of prisons from many countries, these factors gave rise to the threat of a true disaster. The situation in the Majicavo Lamir prison in Mayotte is a striking example of this; more than 200 people tested positive to the coronavirus according to the Regional Health Agency's assessment of 4 June 2020.

Faced with this threat, States have deployed a range of measures aimed at containing the spread of the virus, sometimes to the detriment of the human rights of those detained. Thus, many States such as Italy (on 8 March), Benin (on 18 March), Côte d'Ivoire and Congo have banned family and lawyer visits to detainees. The members of the ACATs, who are key actors in improving conditions of detention and safeguarding the rights of detainees, have also been denied access to places of detention. These deteriorations in prison conditions have led to numerous riots in Italy, costing the lives of more than ten detainees.

Other states, on the other hand, have combined crisis management with respect for human rights by reducing prison overcrowding through the release of certain categories of detainees. This is notably the case in Congo, where some of the detainees awaiting trial who had exceeded the time limits for pre-trial detention or who were being prosecuted for minor offences were released. Similarly, by presidential decree of 15 April 2020, Cameroon granted commutation and remission of sentences to certain detainees¹. These efforts, although insufficient, demonstrate that there are solutions to ensure the protection of detainee's rights while protecting them from the epidemic.

The COVID-19 crisis cannot justify a deterioration in prison conditions and human rights violations. On the contrary, this crisis offers a real opportunity to denounce the failures of the prison systems in place in order to build institutions that respect human rights, where freedom is the rule and detention the exception.

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¹ [Decree N°2020/193 of 15 April 2020 to commute and remit sentences](#)