

Moldova 2001 : Prison Conditions



A typical cell in the main isolator, Chisinau

Report of a visit to the central isolator, Chisinau

When the republic of Moldova was admitted to membership of the Council of Europe in 1995 its government promised to improve the judicial and penitentiary system in the country. Moldova heeded many of the Council's demands, formally, at least. For example, supervision of the penitentiary system was moved to the Ministry of Justice. However, in the five years since joining Europe's leading human rights organization there is little evidence to show that the actual conditions on the ground in the country's prisons and labour colonies have improved.

In December 2000, BHHRG visited the central isolator in the country's capital, Chisinau. Two members of the team had visited the prison previously, in December 1991 as the Soviet Union was about to collapse. They were particularly interested to see if the conditions in the prison had changed since Moldova became independent.

At the time of this visit there were 1750 inmates including 114 women and 94 minors in the isolator which acts as the city's main remand prison. It also accommodates some prisoners who have been sentenced and who are in the pipeline to be moved to longer term institutions. The vice-director of the prison, Vladimir Vladimirovich, said that criminality in Moldova had fallen at the beginning of independence when there were only 800 inmates but one year later, in 1992, this had shot up to 2200. The majority of prisoners are accused of crimes relating to criminal damage to property, drugs and acts of violence.

Discipline in the prison is fine, according to Mr. Vladimirovich. This was confirmed by an independent NGO active in Moldova who praised the staff in the prison for their sensitive handling of the inmates. No one claimed they were being maltreated to BHHRG and the atmosphere between staff and prisoners appeared relaxed. The average prison officer is paid \$70 per calendar month; senior officials receive \$150. But, as elsewhere in the ex-Soviet Union people are paid late: October's salaries had only been paid the day prior to our visit.

However, that is where the good news ends. The prison is a decrepit 19th century building to which no improvements seem to have been made since BHHRG's visit in 1991. The only change, as far as we could judge, was the ongoing replacement of the wooden shutters that act as cell windows by glass and metal grids. Each grill costs \$60 and is part of a \$30,000 project funded by the Swiss government which also included supplementing the prisoners' diets with food like eggs and yoghurt notably absent from the prison menu.

Overcrowding is a problem as is the poor state of the accommodation: rows of bunk beds line the cells leaving little room to move, let alone sit down. Prisoners often stay in bed all day for this reason as much as any other. Needless to say, hygiene and sanitary conditions are poor. Dirty

sheeting is hung up in an attempt to provide privacy. One typical cell, 12'x 6', housed 13 women (and girls) – one with TB. Another young girl's teeth had fallen out during her time in custody.

What compounds the agony for these people is that they can be on remand for anything up to 6 years. In this cell there were women who had been in custody for one, two and in one case, three years. Although they are allowed food parcels few receive them and many do not receive the weekly visit allowed by the law.



An overcrowded cell – inmates are locked up for 24 hours per day

The men's accommodation is no better. 18 juveniles were in a cell of a similar size. Again, it was dark and dirty. Moldova has a long-standing power crisis and prisoners are only allowed lighting for 3 hours per day. As they are locked up in the darkness (in winter, at least) for 24 hours a day with nothing to do, apart from an hour's exercise, it is a miracle that there are so few breaches of discipline. However, there are numerous examples of health problems including cases of scabies and other skin ailments: prisoners showed us sores on their bodies.

The lack of light, airlessness, dampness and over-crowding also affects those prisoners with TB. Moldova is not alone in the CIS in having a problem with the illness in its penitentiaries. 6 sufferers in the isolator were being kept apart from the other male prisoners. Their only hope of getting the correct treatment - DOTS (Directly Observed Treatment, Short-Course) – is if their families can provide them with the necessary drugs. However, there are side-effects to DOTS including pain in the eyes. The prisoners said that the absence of light only exacerbated this.

Also, for DOTS treatment to work the patient should have a high intake of calories. This is certainly not on the agenda. Lunch was being served during our visit. Two large cauldrons are dragged along the corridors between the cells twice a day. One contains soup, the other a porridge/kasha-type mixture. Add to this a hunk of bread, and that is all. The soup seemed to be pure vegetable water and contained no meat or other protein. In fact, the diet on offer could not possibly answer the calorific needs of healthy, let alone sick prisoners.



Lunch – a thin gruel - arrives in two large cauldrons and is served through the grille in a tin billy can

It is easy to see how ordinary drug-susceptible TB can become drug resistant. DOTS is a long-term treatment process that must be followed properly. For example, there should be no interruption in the medication, if not, then the patient becomes, effectively, untreatable and all the more contagious.

At the time of the visit, the prison also had 9 HIV positive sufferers – there had previously been 19 in the small cell in which they were isolated from the other prisoners. Drug abuse is the major cause of HIV in the prison population. No treatment is provided, the only medication available is aspirin. This cell seemed particularly dark and dirty. One prisoner fell out into the arms of the officers accompanying us on the visit as the cell door was opened, crying out for air. It seemed to be generally accepted that he was feigning. However, it is easy to see why someone would use the opportunity provided by a visit like the one we were making to grab a few minutes outside their cell.

Like all the other prisoners, these men said they wanted something to do. There is a prison library, which we visited but it is stocked with old, Soviet era books. The prisoners, men and women alike, wanted more accessible reading matter: magazines and detective stories, not bibles. Of course, they also need more light to be able to read anything.

On their previous visit, nearly ten years ago, BHHRG representatives were given a painting as a gift by one of the women prisoners. At that time the prisoners had things to do – there was also light in the cells during the day. The consensus was that conditions had certainly deteriorated since Soviet times. The prison staff agreed.

As we crossed the prison's central courtyard officers pointed out a pile of coal dust used to heat the prison – they didn't know if or when they would be getting any more this winter. A gas boiler has been installed recently but it is expensive and not sufficient to heat the whole building. It was mild on the day of our visit and even then prisoners complained of feeling cold. It is difficult to imagine what it must be like on a more typical, Central European winter's day.

The last report to document the situation in Moldova's prisons was published in 1997 – by the Moldovan Helsinki Committee. It catalogued a series of problems similar to the ones set out above. Obviously, nothing has been done by the authorities to make good their promises to the Council of Europe and upgrade the conditions in Moldova's prisons. In fact, the situation has got worse. At least prisoners had 6 rather than 3 hours of light a day then.

Chisinau is home to numerous international organizations. Local NGOs have also received funding for projects of debatable worth – seminars on conflict resolution are particularly popular as the breakaway region of Transnistria is perceived as a problem to be debated at length. However, few of them seem to engage with society's real problems on the ground. A bit of imagination and a small amount of money could help, for example, to restock the prison library in Chisinau. It would also be interesting to know what became of the Soros Foundation's much-touted programme to relieve TB

in post-Soviet prisons. The isolator had received assistance from the Foundation, but only in the form of two computers.

The staff of Pharmaciens Sans Frontières have brought some much-needed relief to the inmates in the isolator with their programme to construct proper insulation for the cells. The prisoners were also grateful for the extra food provided for them by the organization. Interestingly, there was evidence in all the cells visited by BHHRG that this food aid had actually been delivered and not stolen along the line by officialdom. This is unusual in itself and a tribute to the transparency of the project and the honesty of the prison staff.

Staff at PSF hope that funding will continue for their work in the prison. It is, after all, a drop in the ocean compared with the vast amounts of aid that has been squandered in the countries of the former Soviet Union on activities that, unlike this, have done nothing to improve the quality of life of their citizens.