

Fact finding visit to Tallinn prison, Estonia on 21 June 2006
by the Quaker Council for European Affairs

On 21 June 2006 a female staff member of the Quaker Council for European Affairs visited Tallinn prison, Estonia accompanied by an independent female interpreter. We were shown around by the male head of the social work department which has 21 employees. Also present on the visit was a female psychologist who has been working in the Estonian prison service for 11 years.

We looked around one of the accommodation blocks and spoke with 2 female Russian-speaking prisoners in their cell (in the presence of the psychologist). We also saw the exercise boxes for remand prisoners, the doctor's room and a punishment cell. During the visit, which lasted around 2 hours, we spoke with a female member of the medical staff and a female social worker who works with females on remand.

Background on Tallinn prison

Tallinn prison is a closed maximum security prison that holds convicted male prisoners and male and female prisoners on remand. Sometimes a small number of juveniles are also held here. As with the majority of Estonian prisons, Tallinn is a camp-style prison from Soviet times. It is located on the territory of the prisoner of war camp that was active between 1944 and 1949¹ and the compound includes a number of decommissioned workshops and industrial production facilities². Between 1950 and 1960 stone buildings were constructed that are still used today, including 2 industrial buildings that were adapted into preliminary investigation blocks in the 1990s.³

Statistics relating to a few days before the visit showed that there were 519 convicted prisoners and 638 prisoners on remand at Tallinn. This included 36 women on remand and 5 convicted women. Convicted women only stay a short while at Tallinn before being transferred to the women's prison at Harku. There are sometimes a small number of juvenile prisoners in Tallinn Prison, both on remand and those who have already been convicted. This is because their trials are held in Northern Estonia, and the closest place to keep them during this time is Tallinn Prison. They are only at here for a short period, approximately 1 week. At the time of our visit there were 2 juvenile female prisoners at Tallinn.

¹ Estonian Ministry of Justice website: http://www.vangla.ee/?set_lang_id=2

² Report to the Estonian Government on the visit to Estonia carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 23-30 September 2003, Strasbourg 27 April 2005, CPT/Inf (2005) 6, <http://www.cpt.coe.int/documents/est/2005-06-inf-eng.htm>

³ Estonian Ministry of Justice website: http://www.vangla.ee/?set_lang_id=2

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The women are not in their own section or wing but their cells are all on the same corridor. There are also male cells on the same floor.

The corridors we walked through were extremely gloomy and oppressive with no natural light or fresh air and poorly lit by artificial lighting. About every 5m there was a barred door which helped to give the place a very claustrophobic feeling. Each cell door was completely closed, each with a spy hole through which the guard could observe the prisoners. We saw both female and male guards. Prisoners did not wear uniforms but could be identified easily as they had to walk with their hands behind their backs so that the guards could see their hands.

Sentencing and daily routine

During our visit we only spoke about the female prisoners on remand as they make up the vast majority of the female prison population at Tallinn and because convicted females are here for only a short time before being sent to Harku.

We saw the section in the block where prisoners are taken on arrival. These are cells where prisoners are held for 2 to 3 hours while waiting to go to their proper cells. They wait here while being photographed, searched, and have their finger prints taken. Men and women are held in separate cells, which are long bare rooms containing long benches on either side.

Female prisoners on remand may be at Tallinn for up to 1 year (usually 6-7 months). Some of the crimes that women are in Tallinn for are theft (often drug-related), other drug-related crime, murder (there are usually 3 or 4 women charged with murder here at any one time, often they have killed an abusive partner or husband), physical abuse, and pimping (finding and managing prostitutes).

Several of the women were captured at the border with fake papers (illegal immigrants trying to get to Scandinavian countries or Britain through Estonia).

All remand prisoners (both male and female) are locked in their cells 23 hours a day. For one hour a day the prisoners (along with their cell mates) can go to an exercise box to walk up and down and get some fresh air. This is not obligatory. The exercise hour is the same time each day for each cell. The exercise boxes are around 15 m² with concrete walls and have a metal grill for the roof. This allows guards to observe the prisoners from above. The grill means that the prisoners are not protected if it rains. Each exercise box has a heavy metal door with a spy-hole so the guard can look in to check on the prisoners.

When we were shown the exercise boxes, there was a lot of clamour and shouting between the exercise boxes. Usually there is a radio station playing loudly in the prison grounds so that the prisoners in different exercise boxes and cells cannot communicate with each other by talking or shouting. The radio had

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been turned off for the duration of our visit, we were told, otherwise we wouldn't have been able to hear each other. The psychologist said that the radio station is changed regularly so that a variety of music is played. She said that she is so used to the radio that she forgets it is playing and it is the same for the prisoners.

There can be up to 6 prisoners per cell but the prison tries to keep numbers per cell lower than this. Cells have a sink, 3 bunk beds, a desk and a toilet in a separate cubicle/closet. The rooms were quite basic and bare and looked as though they had not been decorated in a long time. The women had done what they could to brighten up the bare walls and drawn on them or stuck up photos and pictures. They also had quite a lot of their personal possessions around the room.

While in their cells the prisoners on remand can read or write letters. There is a library at Tallinn that prisoners can order books from. Twice a month they can order books and get 2 or 3 at a time. It used to be the case that the prisoners could get 5 books at a time, but the library did not have enough stock so this was changed. Playing cards are not allowed in the cells as this may encourage gambling. A television or radio can be brought in by the prisoners but they have to pay for their own electricity. If the prisoners misbehave or break the rules (for instance by having playing cards in their cell) the television or radio may be taken away. The female prisoners we spoke to said that they write letters to people on the outside, read books and shout and wave to the male prisoners from their window.

The prisoners get 3 meals a day at 7am, midday and 6pm. We saw cardboard boxes outside many cells containing things that the prisoners had ordered and bought from the prison shop. These included cigarettes and food such as sweets and biscuits.

Remand prisoners get to shower once a week and are escorted with their cellmates to the shower by the guards. Our guide said that this long interval between showers was especially unsuitable for the women. The time at which the prisoners shower is not the same as their hour of exercise so they are able to do both on that particular day.

Prisoners have to pay for their own toiletries (toilet paper, shampoo, toothpaste, sanitary towels, soap etc). The psychologist said that she would like to provide these things freely to the prisoners but they are unable to do so as it is not in the prison budget. She said the people that make the rules are sitting behind desks somewhere in offices far away and do not understand the reality of prison life. The prison does not have any obligation to supply toiletries to the prisoners, but for prisoners who don't have outside support the prison tries to provide them with basic toiletries once every 3 months.

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Prisoners on remand are unable to attend church services at the prison. If they want to meet up with the chaplain, social worker or psychologist then they have to give in a piece of paper stating their reason which could be as simple as 'wanting to have a chat'. Prisoners may make appointments up to once a day (but not more often).

Prisoners can accept clothes and toiletries through the post but not food or cigarettes. All things are limited. Under Estonian law a woman prisoner may only have a certain number of each item of clothing (bras, pairs of socks etc) and things she does have are recorded and itemised. Sometimes prisoners obtain extra things illegally, and if a search of their cell reveals this then these items are confiscated.

Prisoners are allowed no drugs or alcohol in the prison. Tobacco and cigarettes are allowed and can be bought by the inmates. There is no cash money in the prison though and prisoners have an account through which they can purchase things. This account may be supplemented by friends or family on the outside.

Work and Education

There are no work or education opportunities for prisoners on remand.

Keeping in touch and visiting

Visiting rights are the same for both female and male remand prisoners. The court may decide that, due to the nature of the crime or court case, that the prisoner can have no contact with the outside world. Those who are allowed contact are allowed to make telephone calls once a week (though they have to pay for the costs themselves), can send and receive letters and can see personal visitors once a month for a maximum of 2 hours. We did not get an opportunity to see the visiting room but it was described by our guide as small with a glass partition that separates the prisoners and their visitors; there is no physical contact allowed between them. There is a different room in which prisoners meet with their lawyers and any other formal visitors.

One of the female prisoners that we spoke to had a daughter on the outside who she could phone once a week and meet with once a month. Another prisoner in the same cell (but not present at the interview), was not allowed contact with the outside world. She had a photo of her small child stuck on the wall next to her bed.

Remand prisoners have no direct contact with NGOs or organizations on the outside but are allowed to write to and receive letters from them (though again, this is not possible if contact has been prohibited with the outside world).

Maternity and pregnancy

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Over the course of a year there may be several pregnant women imprisoned at Tallinn. Pregnant prisoners are treated the same as other prisoners (except for getting more medical care). So, for example, they can be sent to the punishment cells. No women have been inmates at the time of the baby's birth, but if this did happen then the prisoners would be taken to a civilian hospital for the birth.

There is no mother and baby unit at Tallinn. The only mother and baby unit (MBU) in the country is at Harku women's prison. If and when convicted, a female prisoner will be transferred to Harku. If at this point she has a child who is under 3 years of age, then the child may be able to live with her in the MBU at Harku.

Children on the outside

There is no official data on the number or percentage of women at Tallinn with children on the outside. The social worker we spoke to sees some women but not all of them; she said that she is aware of one woman with 5 children, one woman with no children and one with 1 child.

Juvenile prisoners

At the time of our visit there were 2 juveniles at Tallinn. We did not have an opportunity to speak with them or to discuss their daily routine with our guide.

Health

Between 9 am and 10am and again after the guards have done their evening inspection the doctors and nurse go through the corridors to check whether anyone needs medical attention. If any prisoners want to see them, then they can make an appointment to see them at this time. All medical services are paid for from the prison budget. The doctor's room was on the same corridor as the women's cells and was in a room with similar dimensions to the cell we had been in. The dentist's room, also in a cell-sized room, appeared modern and hygienic.

There are both male and female medical staff. The gynaecologist is male and has worked in the prison for more than 8 years. The doctor who takes the HIV tests is also male and has worked at the prison for a long time.

We spoke with a female member of the medical staff. When asked about the differences in the conditions that male and female prisoners seek help for, she said that in principle the medical conditions are the same for men as for women (except for 'the gynaecological things').

Mental Health

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According to the doctor, the female prisoners don't suffer more from depression than male prisoners.

When asked if there was a problem with women self-harming themselves, she said that she 'couldn't remember at the moment'.

Suicides seldom happen and an investigation follows each time. There have been no suicides this year at Tallinn but there 'may have been a few the year before last' (but these were men and not women prisoners).

We spoke to a female social worker who works with both male and female prisoners. When asked if there is a difference between them she said that 'yes, women have different fears' and that they often have a lot of worries relating to their children. Often they ask her questions such as how to get hold of and fill in certain documents for their children, such as how to get state allowances for them. They get more depressed than the male prisoners and are more likely to get hysterical. She doesn't speak to all women, just those that want to come and speak to her and she said that there is no psychiatric tests/screening done on the prisoners when they arrive; they are only asked questions such as 'do you have any mental conditions?'.

HIV and sexual health

On arrival all prisoners can have a voluntary HIV test and almost all agree to do so. If they test negative then they are given information on how to stay safe. They are tested again after 3 months and if they are still negative then they are not tested again.

At the time of visiting there were 3 HIV positive female inmates at Tallinn (around 10% of all female prisoners). In total there are 160 HIV positive prisoners at Tallinn (around 10% of the total prison population at Tallinn).

There is no separation of HIV positive inmates from non-HIV positive inmates. This medical information is treated as very confidential and it is up to each individual to choose whether they want to tell their cellmates. As far as the staff know there have been no cases of HIV prisoners being bullied. The inmates are quite tolerant towards each other regarding HIV, as they 'each have enough of their own personal problems to deal with'. Four years ago, when the number of HIV cases rose rapidly, there were a couple of instances in which prisoners used their HIV status as a threat to other prisoners and guards; 'If you hurt me, you'll become infected'. However, this is not what happens in general.

Drugs

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There are a high percentage of inmates with drug problems. People who come into prison with drug addiction problems are not given any treatment for their addiction but will be given medication to treat symptoms such as sleep problems.

Staff, security and discipline

There are 19 punishment cells which are in a separate building from the accommodation block. It is dilapidated concrete block with punishment cells on two floors and showers at the end of each corridor. Within this separate block there is also a room for drug testing and an interview room where prisoners who are being punished can meet with the social worker or chaplain etc if requested.

Prisoners may be put in the punishment cells for between 5 or 30 days, with longer sentences given to those who are violent or aggressive. A prisoner may be put in a punishment cell for having a mobile phone or weapon. Women prisoners usually serve between 5 and 10 days, for example if they are noisy at night or if they refuse to stop shouting or are rude.

1 or 2 people may be put in the same punishment cell (provided they are the same sex). A cell consists of a fold-down bed, 2 seats and a table, a toilet and sink. The fold-down beds are locked up during the day, and prisoners may only lie on them between 10 pm and 6 am. When in the punishment cells, prisoners can only read a copy of the punishment rules or the bible and are not allowed to bring any personal belongings in there with them. As with the door for the standard cells there are spy-holes in them which allow the guards to observe the prisoners.

During their punishment, prisoners still have the right to 1 hour of exercise a day, which they spend with their cellmate from the punishment cell rather than their usual cellmates. Prisoners who are being punished are entitled to 1 shower a week (both hot and cold water is available). Showers for the punished prisoners are in the same block as the punishment cells. The maximum time in punishment cell is 30 days.

If a female prisoner has taken drugs and she becomes a threat to the prison security or someone else's security, e.g. if her actions are violent, then a disciplinary procedure will be initiated, which can conclude with a disciplinary conviction such as being sent to a punishment cell. However, a prisoner will not be sent to a punishment cell just for taking drugs. Drug abuse may (but does not have to) result in a criminal conviction where the prison starts a criminal case against the prisoner.

Foreign nationals and different religions

The social worker at the prison said that they don't have records of the prisoners' nationalities but make guesses based on the names of the inmates. From this,

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she said that 4 out of the 41 women prisoners are Estonians with the others being Russian speaking.

At the time of our visit there were no Muslim or Jewish women in the prison. We were told that there are 3 Jewish men in the male section and that the prison finds it very difficult to provide a kosher diet for them, relying on the Jewish community for assistance. This suggests that the prison would also have difficulty in providing for Jewish women prisoners who required a kosher diet.