Drug detention hell

A CHILD in a Cambodian drug rehabilitation centre was forced to perform oral sex on a military police commander while women in the same institutions have been raped for days on end, a damning new report from Human Rights Watch has found.

The study titled "Torture in the Name of Treatment: Human Rights Abuses in Drug Detention Centers in Vietnam, China, Cambodia, and Laos" also found Cambodian inmates were forced to "ame" bat ice cream" (perform oral sex) and beaten. The commander asked me to say something, an anonymous child said according to the report.

Former women detainees had spoken of how others were sexually assaulted after they were taken away on the pretext that they had made a mistake.

"Sometimes, they raped the same women five days consecutively because there were no new arrivals. They raped a must woman about five or six times," a survivor said, according to the report.

"Other times, I heard her scream... I just heard the way [she] tried to make a sound," she said.

Among other human rights violations found inside Cambodian centres during the five-year study, detainees were fed up in the sun without food or water for hours and placed in isolation cells.

Khiu Samorn, director of the anti-drug department at the Ministry of Interior, slammed the accusations as "baseless" observations made outside the country and said HRW should focus on helping the government crack down on drug producers and criminals.

"For rape or abuse, if there is a real complaint filed with us, my authorities will go down to arrest those officials, but I've never heard about reports about rape or abuse of women and children," he said, adding there was no forced labour "like during the Pol Pot regime."

"Severe drug addicts create social insecurity. Petty crimes can happen any time when they have no money to buy drugs, so they must be arrested to be sent to a drug centre," he said.

But Phil Robertson, HRW's deputy Asia director, said the abuses were happening and he could not understand why UN agencies and donors working with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation didn't speak up.

"They say that they have staff visiting regularly, so the question is: why aren't they picking up on the rights abuses that take place in these centres?" he said.

"We've been talking to UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund) and others about this, and what we've been getting is expressions of concern that it is so horrific that this is happening, and when we push them on this, nothing seems to happen."

The report and such agencies and donors to publicly call for the closure of all drug detention centres, release of all detainees, investigations into abuse and compensation for victims.

On March 12, UN agencies issued a joint-statement unequivocally calling for the closure of drug detention centres and the release of detainees individually "without delay."

Olivier Lermet, country manager of the UN's Office on Drugs and Crime, said the agency was at the forefront of advocacy on the issue and had been engaging authorities and civil society to create community-based treatment centres.

"We need to put rubber on the road to establish these (voluntary) programs," he said.

The agency hoped one such initiative that had been established in Bayantry Measereay province could be duplicated nationwide, but shortfalls in funding reportedly meant "the model of compulsory care centers is what prevails.

Cambodia had been taking "bold steps" to explore a completely different approach to medical services for drug users, he said.

No UN agencies were supporting compulsory drug rehabilitation centres, he added.

A Youth Rehabilitation Centre in Phnom Penh's Oum Chan district where authorities sent children suspected of using drugs was shuttered after a scathing HRW report in 2010 alleged gross violations had been committed there.

The centre had allegedly used vehicles provided by UNICEF through an EU-funded program.

Still, authorities continue to wrongly commit children and people who are by no means addicted to drugs during street sweeps of "undesirables" ahead of public holidays and major events, said David Harding, a technical adviser at the NGO Friends International.

"Children shouldn't be in drug rehabilitation centres, full stop, but they are. But currently, the policies regulating those drug rehabilitation centres appear to be very, very limited," he said.

Unless the government addresses accusations about the lack of due process in its drug rehabilitation system, rights violations and completely ineffective treatments, attacks against it would continue.

Officials at the Ministry of Social Affairs "could not be reached yesterday."

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Times. I saw this with my own eyes," one detainee said, according to the report.

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