The Nelson Mandela Rules

The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners

Nelson Mandela

“*It is said that no one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.*”

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela

To honour the legacy of Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison, the rules are known as the **Nelson Mandela Rules**.

18 July

Nelson Mandela International Day

- Promote humane conditions of imprisonment
- Raise awareness about prisoners being a continuous part of society
- Value the work of prison staff as an important social service

122 rules

35% revised in 9 thematic areas

- Staff training
- Terminology
- Access to legal representation
- Prisoners’ inherent dignity as human beings
- Vulnerable groups of prisoners
- Medical and health services
- Restrictions, discipline and sanctions
- Investigations of deaths and torture in custody

First United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Treatment of Offenders

Geneva, 1955 – Adoption of the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners

Mandate for revision

General Assembly, 2011

Review process 2011-2014

Consensus on all revisions

Cape Town, 2015

Endorsed and approved by the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice and the Economic and Social Council

Adoption by the General Assembly

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A crisis in prisons

A large number of prison systems around the world are at a stage of crisis, with serious effects on prisoners, their families and societies as a whole. The ultimate purpose of imprisonment—the protection of society from crime—is undermined in prisons, which are overstretched and poorly managed.

Prison overcrowding

- 115 countries: >100% of capacity
- 79 countries: >120% of capacity
- 51 countries: >150% of capacity

Total: 198 countries

Core challenges

- Continuous growth of prison populations and prison overcrowding
- Severe (financial and socio-economic) costs of imprisonment
- Failure to ensure safe, secure and humane custody of prisoners

Global Prison Challenges Programme

As custodian of the Nelson Mandela Rules, UNODC is mandated to provide technical assistance to Member States in the field of penal reform. In order to further enhance its technical assistance following the adoption of the Nelson Mandela Rules, a new Global Programme on Addressing Prison Challenges has been launched.

Focus areas

- Reducing the scope of imprisonment and preventing crime
- Strengthening prison management and improving prison conditions
- Supporting the social reintegration of offenders and preventing recidivism

UNODC will focus its technical assistance on three strategic areas:

1. Core challenges
   - Severe (financial and socio-economic) costs of imprisonment
   - Continuous growth of prison populations and prison overcrowding
   - Failure to ensure safe, secure and humane custody of prisoners

2. Focus areas
   - Reducing the scope of imprisonment and preventing crime
   - Strengthening prison management and improving prison conditions
   - Supporting the social reintegration of offenders and preventing recidivism

3. Other areas
   - Developing comprehensive and evidence-based prison policies
   - Enhancing law enforcement capacity and effectiveness
   - Promoting international and regional cooperation
   - Strengthening the role of women in prison and gender-sensitive policies
   - Promoting the social reintegration of offenders and preventing recidivism

“In our efforts to make societies more resilient to crime and to promote social cohesion..., we cannot disregard those in prison. We must remember that prisoners continue to be part of society, and must be treated with respect due to their inherent dignity as human beings.”

Yury Fedotov, Executive Director, UNODC