

## Drug detention hell

David Boyle and Chhay Channyda

**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 Vietnam, China, Cambodia, and Lao PDR*, also found Cambodian inmates were forced to build

houses for guards and were often detained despite no clear evidence they were addicted to drugs.

Treatments shown to work based on evidence are absent from the centres in Cambodia and Vietnam, yet despite this and the systematic abuse uncovered, donors and UN agencies working with relevant government authorities did little to intervene, the report states.

Cambodian children told Human Rights Watch of how they were beaten, shocked with electric batons and subjected to sexual abuse by staff.

"Some massages I had to give were

sexual ... if I did not do this, he would beat me. The commander asked me to 'eat ice cream' [perform oral sex]. I refused, and he slapped me ... Performing oral sex happened many times ... how could I refuse?" it quoted an anonymous child as saying.

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 mute woman about five or six

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

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

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

Khieu Samorn, director of the anti-drug department at the Ministry of

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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 or seen 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 that, and what we've been getting is expressions of concern that it is so horrible that this is happening, and when we push them on this, nothing seems to happen."

The report compels 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 detained individuals "without delay".

Olivier Lemet, 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 Banteay Meanchey province could be duplicated nationwide, but shortfalls in funding regrettably meant "the model of compulsory care centres 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 Chom Chaom district where authorities sent children suspected of using drugs was shuttered after a scathing HRW report in 2010 alleged gross rights 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 these drug rehabilitation centres appear to very, very limited," he said.

Unless the government addressed 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. **ADDITIONAL**

REPORTING BY JUSTINE DRENNAN ■

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