

NATIONAL

For Children Jailed With Their Mothers, An Unlikely Better Life

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Just a few steps beyond the tall, gray walls that encase the living quarters and courtyard of the women of Prey Sar Correctional Center 2, an anti-prison is rising.

With colorful animals painted on the walls, no bars or even glass on the windows, and eventually a garden and playground abutting, the daycare center will—for 11 hours a day—try to make children forget that they are living in one of the least child-friendly environments imaginable.

Female detainees at Prey Sar, in Phnom Penh's Dangkae district, sometimes request to keep their young children with them, who were either born there or had no one besides their incarcerated mothers to care for them.

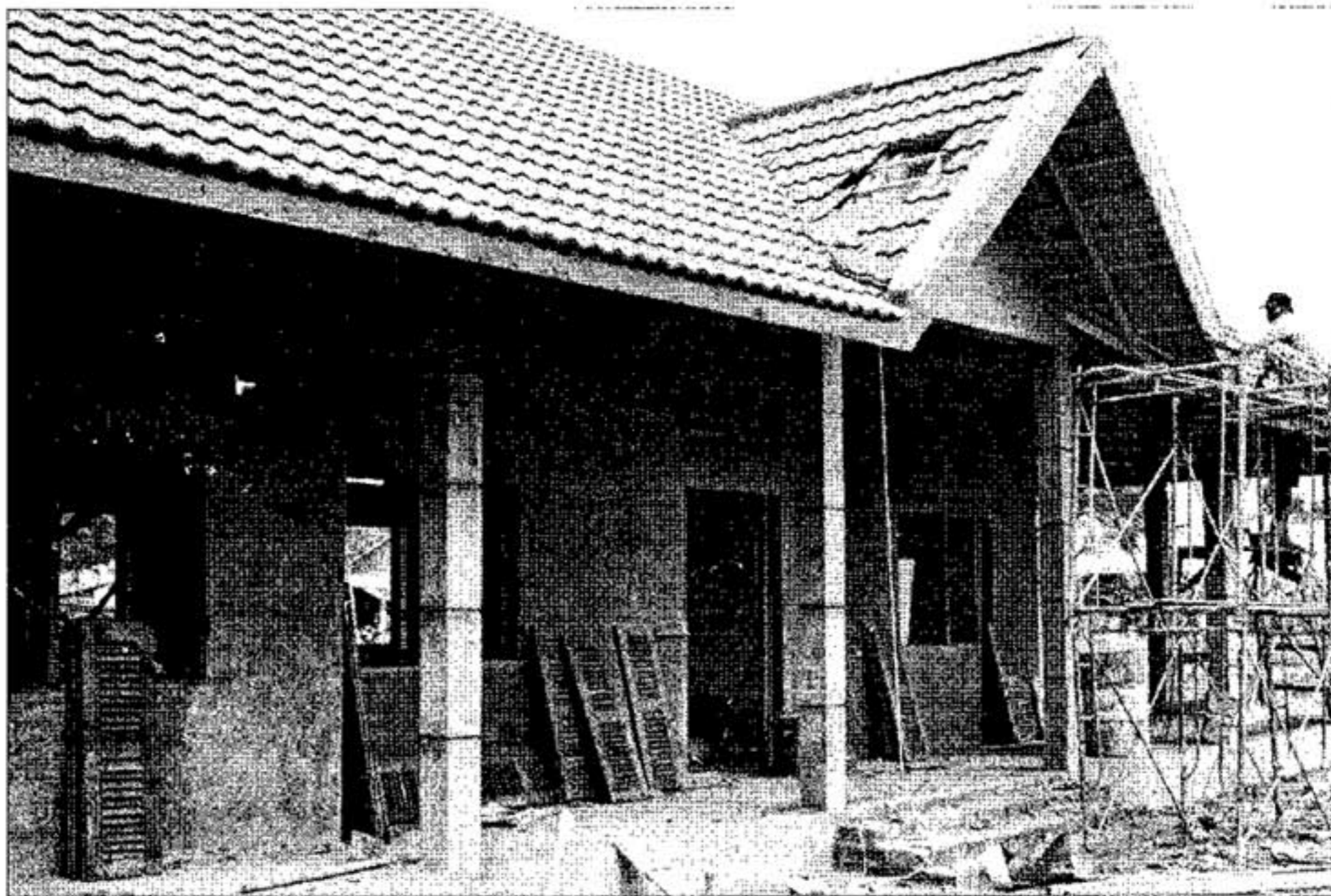
Living their early years behind bars, with too little food, inadequate healthcare, and no socialization, not even toys, children see their development stunted, and their chances at a normal life are slim. At age 6, they must leave and rejoin family elsewhere, or, as is often the case, become homeless, explained Marie-Laurence Comberti, president of AMADE Cambodia, the NGO building the center.

"They've never passed this security gate. They only know these four walls," she said Tuesday, walking around the Prey Sar compound. "These kids, they've never seen a car, a truck, a moto, a bicycle. They've never seen what a chicken is, a duck. Nothing. They have no toys. All they see is the weapons, the batons."

Comberti plans to open the center in April for about 20 children aged 6 months to 6 years, with three full meals and a shower a day, a nutrition program for malnourished children, educational activities, sports and, most importantly, playtime. The children will also be taken, in small steps, out of the prison compound to the nearby pagoda or local market, to be introduced to the outside world, Comberti added. The children need to learn everything they normally would outside, from how to read to how vegetables grow.

"They are not difficult children; they are children who have never been socialized," she added.

Seventeen children under 7 years old live at Prey Sar, and two inmates are pregnant, said Chap Sineang, the director of Cor-



Isabelle Roughol/The Cambodia Daily

Under construction at Phnom Penh's Prey Sar prison, this daycare center will host, from 7 am to 6 pm, the children living in prison with their detained mothers. Teachers and social workers will educate the children and prepare them for their return to the outside world.

rectional Center 2. There could be many more, as detainees sometimes ask to bring along two or three children, and he only approves cases so dire he "can't say no," he explained.

"One of the most important reasons mothers—both pretrial detainees and convicted prisoners—bring the kids to live with them is because there is no caretaker. I do not think the mothers feel lonely and so decided to take the kids to live with them here, because life in prison is not as good as living at home," he added.

When a child living at Prey Sar reaches age 6, the prison administration normally contacts local rights group Licadho or other NGOs to have the child taken in somewhere else, he said.

"A kid here is 7 years old, but the mother...just begs us to keep her kid in, as her prison term is almost over," Chap Sineang added.

His guards will also benefit from the project, as AMADE will provide a teacher to tutor their children, a second teacher to educate the mothers, and a third for the detainees' children, Comberti said. She added that AMADE also hopes to provide vocational training for the mothers. Three social workers will seek relatives or foster families for children reaching age 6, and the NGO Friends International agreed to

take in children with nowhere to go, she added.

"Those kids are not convicts or criminals," said Heng Hak, the director-general of the Ministry of Interior's general department of prisons. "I am hopeful that these

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PRESIDENT, AMADE CAMBODIA

kids will get an education and good treatment because when their mothers' prison terms are over, those kids will have basic education to continue their studies at other places."

In November 2008, Heng Hak signed a 10-year memorandum of agreement with AMADE Cambodia, giving the NGO about 1,500 square meters of land on the prison grounds.

"It is the first NGO that asks for a project to help kids living in

prison with their mothers, and I am really glad to work on such a project," Heng Hak said.

It started with a visit to Cambodia in January 2006 by Princess Caroline of Hanover, the president of AMADE World, who took on the cause of childhood protection worldwide and is expected to visit again later this year, Comberti said. AMADE Cambodia was singled out as the beneficiary of a fundraising concert in a Paris cathedral by the association Victoires 24 and its president, Ghislaine Venard, who collected \$43,000 for the center.

The Order of Malta will provide food, and MICADO, a French medical NGO, doctors for regular checkups. Functioning costs will for the first year be covered by AMADE World, after which Comberti will need to find other sponsors.

"It's a pilot project but I hope that in the future, we'll be able to reproduce it in other prisons," she said.

The idea simply came from seeing one too many news reports about the plight of these children, and realizing she couldn't wait for the government to be able to organize and fund the children's care, Comberti said.

"How many children have already been irremediably lost?" she asked.