

## NATIONAL

# Children Living With Jailed Mothers Lose Out, Report Says

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Cambodian prisons are home to dozens of children who live with their inmate mothers in overcrowded cells, where they endure limited access to food and education, according to a new report from local rights group Licadho.

"Life in Cambodian prison is harsh for any individual, but particularly for those children who are born in prison or sent to prison to live with their mother if they have nowhere else to go," according to the report, which was posted yesterday on Licadho's website.

"Placed in overcrowded prison cells with limited access to food, clean water, healthcare, education and recreational activities, children are detained in conditions which are detrimental to their physical, mental and emotional well-being," the report continues.

Licadho based its conclusions on interviews last year with 37 mothers who live with their 40 children in 10 Cambodian prisons. The rights group also interviewed six pregnant inmates.

One of the findings was that 11 percent of the surveyed women were never allowed to leave their cells, while only 18 percent of the mothers spent more than five hours each day outside their cells with their children.

Access to nutritious food was one of the top concerns of imprisoned mothers of children under the age of 4 and pregnant women, according to the report. Women with older children were more worried about the lack of education behind bars.

The new report was largely consistent with the results of past surveys by the human rights group.

According to Heng Hak, director-general of the Interior Ministry's General Department of Prisons, 36 young children currently live with their inmate mothers in Cambodian prisons, along with eight pregnant women. He said the children are mostly aged 3 to 6, although some are older.

Government policy allows inmate mothers to keep their children with them until they are 6 years old, after which they are handed over to family members

or NGOs, according to Mr Hak.

He said "such a policy is not accomplished" because "the mother prisoners have sympathy and compassion and ask to keep the kids longer." The Licadho report said some children stay in prisons until they are 8 years old.

Mr Hak admitted that life in prison is difficult for children

"Even if we build a nice villa for them, there's no freedom, so it can harm their physical and mental growth," he said.

But he also said officials treat the children well, and he denied a claim in the report that mothers and their children are forced to share the daily food allowance of 2,800 riel.

"I can say that we treat them very well, because we offer them the same food allowance as adult prisoners at 2,800 riel," he said. "Moreover, besides the government's effort to give them special treatment, we work closely with a number of NGOs, including Licadho and Unicef."

As an example of this special treatment, Mr Hak cited a day care center at Prey Sar Correctional Center 2 built last year by the NGO Amade Cambodia. The report also cited the day care center, saying Prey Sar is the "only prison that provides children with access to toys and allows them to attend preschool for eight hours per day."