

# UN seeks end to drug detention

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UN ORGANISATIONS have urged the Cambodian government to close its 13 compulsory drug detention and rehabilitation centres, saying they do not offer detainees an effective chance of rehabilitating.

In a joint statement, 12 organisations including the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNICEF, the World Health Organisation and UNAIDS have called on countries to abandon compulsory detention centres in favour of community-based health and social services.

The statement also questions the detention without due process of children who have been victims of sexual exploitation.

"The continued existence of compulsory drug detention and rehabilitation centres, where people suspected of using drugs or being dependent on drugs, people who have engaged in sex work or children who have been victims of sexual exploitation are detained without due process in the name of 'treatment' or 'rehabilitation', is a serious concern," it says.

David Harding, an international adviser on drugs for Friends International, supported the call for change, saying forced drug detention and rehabilitation centres in Cambodia were "essentially a huge waste of money".

In many centres, detainees shared dormitories with hundreds of others, were not provided with adequate medical treatment, were forced into vigorous exercise that was supposed to help them "sweat out" their addiction and could not leave, Harding said.

Military police are often in charge of the centres, and youths are thrown in with adults.

According to a 2010 Human Rights Watch Report titled *Skin on the Cable*, people with drug addictions are often arrested without a warrant and not given access to a lawyer. Inside these centres, they are

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at the risk of sexual violence and torture.

"If you consider success as [detainees] becoming drug-free when they're in these centres, that's success . . . but if you anticipate whether they will stay drug-free when they leave, you're going to have pretty close to 100 per cent relapse," Harding said.

"If you want people to remain abstinent, you need to work with them to develop coping strategies. I'm not aware that any of these centres have the relevant psychological tools for this."

UNODCD country manager Olivier Lernet said his office supported evidence-based approaches that encouraged voluntary access to treatment in the community.

"In fact, Cambodia can be considered as THE country in the greater Mekong region [that is] exploring alternatives to compulsory drug treatment," he told the *Post* via email.

Having alternatives at a community level that involved NGOs and were connected to health centres and referral hospitals would provide a transition for those with drug addictions once the centres were closed, Lernet said.

"We know this is more effective and more sustainable than closed centre-based approaches," he said.

A joint program by the government, the UN and civil society had been piloted in Banteay Meanchey Province with "very interesting" results in terms of increased access to psychosocial and medical services, inclusive of drug treatment, Lernet said.

"Considering the limited resources, it has been achieving a lot."

But Khiev Samorn, general secretary for the Ministry of Interior's National Authority for Combating Drugs, said there was no reason to close compulsory drug and rehabilitation centres, and questioned the use of the word "detention" when referring to the 13 centres.

"It is not detention. It is a rehabilitation centre. Detention is prison," he said, adding that many families had sought help from the centres.

"It is essential to the victims' families – they need it."

Khiev Samorn declined to comment on the UN statement, saying a decision on the closure of such centres as Prey Speu, Orkas Knhom and similar ones in the provinces was the purview of higher-ranking officials.

Chan Soveth, head of AD-HOC's human-rights program, said studies should be undertaken on the treatment of detainees and the government had not responded to allegations of torture well enough. ■