

There are basic standards to which any liberal democracy purports to observe that, by any hallmark, are being ignored in how people are detained, writes **Mick Clifford**



Violence is inevitable in ‘degrading prisons’

IMAGINE your home for the foreseeable is a small little room, measuring less than 12 sq m. That’s maybe 4m long, 3m wide. Imagine you’re a man living there with three other men. There is a toilet in this room that is not partitioned off. One of the four of you has to sleep on a mattress on the floor every night, which can only be within a foot or so of the toilet and which any of the other three may need to use at any time. All four of the men eat their meals in this tiny room, off trays, at the same time. They spend a good chunk of each waking hour confined to the room. If the four of them were Zen Buddhists, the living conditions would be challenging, if not really difficult. The Buddhists would at least have recourse to their personal resources, their capacity to mentally negotiate difficult circumstances and accept the physical discomfort as a fact of life. However, the men in question are not Buddhists. They are most likely of low educational attainment, one or two could have a propensity for violence, and there is likely to be other issues informing the immediate problems — such as mental illness and addiction to alcohol or drugs. Imagine the powder keg the room would be? Imagine the kind of state some of these men would be when they finally get to leave the room and rejoin society? That is the reality of prison in Ireland today. The above scenario resembles closely what a recent inspection report recorded in Cloverhill, the West Dublin institution, in 2023. The situation, the report stated, was “particularly grave”. “At the outset of the inspection, 152 people — one third of the prison’s population — were being held four to a cell measuring less than 12 sq m, with one occupant sleeping on a mattress on the floor in each of these 38 cells,” wrote the inspector, Mark Kelly. “The in-cell lavatories were not partitioned and prisoners were eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner in these highly-confined, stuffy, and malodorous spaces.” Violence, the report went on, would be the inevitable result of confining prisoners in “these degrading conditions”. Overcrowding is now rampant across the Irish prison system. Last Friday, there were 6,034 prisoners in a system that has 4,631 beds. Limerick’s female prison was the most overcrowded at 154% capacity. There was a capacity of 135% in Limerick’s male prison. In Cork, one in every five prisoners were without a bed. Mountjoy was at 121% capacity. Keeping prisoners in these conditions in a country that is among the most developed in the world, where personal rights are held up and protected by the Constitution, is deeply inhumane. A proportion of those locked up — the exact proportion is often disputed — must be incarcerated to reflect the seriousness of their crimes and to protect society. However, even in that context, even allowing for the often violent — sometimes depraved — nature of the crimes



The situation of overcrowding in Cloverhill Prison, West Dublin, is ‘particularly grave’, according to a prison inspector’s report from 2023.

Picture: Leah Farrell/RollingNews.ie

for which some are imprisoned, the conditions arguably amount to torture. There is an illusion in some sections of society that prison can be a bit of a holiday camp. This is completely at odds with the reality of living conditions, and it conveniently sidesteps that the deprivation of liberty itself is a massive imposition — and correctly so in many cases — on a life. There are basic standards to which any alleged liberal democracy purports to observe and, by any hallmark, those standards are being completely ignored right now in how people are detained. The current political environment, however, is such that only offices like the Inspector of Prisons and organisations such as the Irish Penal Reform

Trust have any interest in attempting to observe basic rights for a section of society that is easily ignored. The inspector’s report, published last month, concluded that the “overcrowding crisis” can only be resolved through “courageous action at political level, such as agreeing to impose an enforceable ceiling on the number of people who can safely be held in each prison”. The political courage referenced would be unprecedented. Instead, any political reference to prisons tends to focus on sounding tough and demanding that ever more people are locked up. The most recent wheeze in this respect concerns figures that have been published around crime being committed by individuals out on bail. Sinn Féin TD Matt Carthy received

an answer to a Dáil question that suspects in 40,348 crimes carried out in 2024 were on bail. Mr Carthy did note that many, if not most, of the crimes at issue would be considered relatively minor. However, he suggested that some have been serious — including those which resulted in a loss of life. “The public will not tolerate a situation where dangerous criminals are repeatedly released on bail to commit further crimes,” Mr Carthy said. Petrified that Sinn Féin might steal a march on Fine Gael — the self-styled law and order party — MEP Regina Doherty jumped in to posit that “too many offenders see bail as a revolving door — one that allows them to commit crime after crime with impunity”.

“That has to end,” she added. The message was clear: Possibly thousands of offenders who were getting bail should instead be locked up on remand. Where they might be shovelled into the system didn’t receive any attention. There was no analysis of the figures to determine any instance where a serious crime, verifiably committed by an offender on bail, should have been foreseen. There was nothing about the reality that around a fifth of the current prison population are on remand, and that an awful lot of people are actually denied bail. Nothing about the reality that three in every four committals to prison are for less than 12 months, and that there

needs to be something done “to stem the flow of people on short sentences into our prison system and help more people move on from offending”. Instead, the political imperative is to sound tough and attempt to surf instinctive emotional reactions to anything about crime by demanding that more people are locked up. With that level of political cowardice, there is little hope of addressing urgent problems about overcrowding and more long-term issues such as finding alternative sanctions for minor crimes in pursuit of a better result for society as a whole. Ultimately, it is society as a whole which will be the big loser with that kind of short-term, short-sighted attitude.

Sudanese refugees fleeing blood flow are a constant trickle

IT WAS hot, so hot that even a giant mahogany tree provided no shade. Temperatures were racing towards 40C on the border between Sudan and South Sudan. Dry red dust slowly coated everything or anyone who stood still. There was a hurry-up-and-wait feel to the day as refugees from the brutal civil war in Sudan continued to trickle through this crossing, since fighting began in April 2023. I was on the South Sudan side, near a river marking the border between the former enemy countries. It is sometimes a pub quiz question: What is the youngest country in the world? Answer: South Sudan, just 14 years old. The bustling capital city of Juba is marching ahead with modernisation, funded by oil money, mainly. Asphalt roads have been laid and multi-storey buildings tower over corrugated-iron, lean-to shacks. The men’s basketball team won their first game at the Paris Olympics last year. Alek Wek, born in Wau, South Sudan, and once a refugee herself, is just one of the women from this region on global catwalks. Here, on the border, meanwhile, a family was setting up on the river bank with yellow jerry cans to fill with water. “How clean is that water?” I asked later, having visited a clinic that treats cholera patients. Not clean at all, pretty dangerous, in fact, was the frustrated response from a local administrator. Many wells were destroyed, he said, during unusual flooding late last year. Flooding seemed impossible in this heat, but everyone is on edge, worrying about the rains to come. I thought about Storm Eowyn, bullying its way across the West of Ireland,

South Sudan has become a tented refuge for the people of its neighbour and former enemy, Sudan, where civil war has raged since 2023, says **Niamh Griffin**



and how quickly nature can turn on us. Goats certainly won the battle between sleep and the dawn chorus around the compound where staff working for Concern Worldwide — and visiting journalists — stay. Beautiful birds fly around, but all I can hear in the mornings is the hoarse wheezing of goats and one particularly loud cockerel. Their idea of dawn seemed to start around 4.30am. The goats eventually end up in a stew. Chatting with some of the staff over dinner, I said that my family kept goats when I was a child in Cork, but only for milking. Silence. Then: “Why didn’t you eat the goats?” That is a good question, but not one I could answer. I cannot get the tent cholera clinic out of my head as we debate the merits of goat meat. ‘Cholera’: Even the word is heavy. An outbreak raged across Ireland between 1832 and 1833, leaving a 76%



Wadweil Camp in South Sudan, 75km from the border with Sudan. The Sudanese have been fleeing civil war for refuge in South Sudan since April 2023.

Picture: Eugene Ikol, Concern Worldwide

death rate in some areas. In Limerick, more than 200 people died in just six weeks. The fear on the faces of two mothers I speak with in Malek Miir health centre — their children in beds, getting treatment — is a stark reminder. Vaccine campaigns are rolling out

in South Sudan and in Sudan, even as the war continues. While killings, rapes, or mass starvation involving children are what it takes for stories from this region to make the European news, small victories count. Just making it to South Sudan is a

win for refugees who may have travelled weeks from burning homes or seen family members killed. It must be especially so for the many pregnant refugee women we meet. The main refugee camp is home to about 20,000 people, despite an arson attack in January.

Concrete huts are being built at the back, with aid agency signage everywhere. I walked into one and spun around in the single room, trying to imagine this stifling, shadowy space filled with people, a crying baby, broken hearts, horrific traumatic memories. It is not a simple war they are fleeing, with obvious good guys and bad guys. Both sides have been accused of committing atrocities; both sides reportedly smuggle out gold for arms in defiance of sanctions. Is that why the war lurks behind the headlines in Europe, even as the UN Security Council calls for a halt to the fighting? Here, on the ground, the windows of the Concern Jeep boast stickers saying, ‘No arms on board’. This is near the border. Many of the staff are also far from their families, with distances amplified by difficulties in travelling on the dirt roads. Two midwives come close to tears as they describe visiting their own children just once a month. As we drove away from the camp, I asked the local staff why they do it, why helping the refugees, as well as their own community, is such a priority. “They are our brothers and sisters; we have to help them,” Riak said, turning to look out the window as the driver carefully steered the Jeep between pot-holes on the dirt-surface road. While the sun went down and people began to doze, it seemed there was no need to say anything else. ■ Niamh Griffin is health correspondent at the *Irish Examiner*. She was in South Sudan to observe the work of Concern Worldwide as civil war rages across Sudan, spreading millions of refugees around East Africa, including into its neighbour, South Sudan.