Boys behind bars: “The beds were taken away because they were using them as ladders to escape through the rotting roof.”

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KUMASI, GHANA (December 11, 2006): It looks like a chicken coop, equipped with barbed wire and heavy wood doors. Four boys peer out. Their faces squeeze through the tiny barred window.

“I hate it here, they don’t let us out, ever,” says one of the prisoners.

The smell of warm urine and mold waft up from under the door. This is the Asawase remand house. Up to 30 boys are kept locked up in the dark shed. They are all awaiting trial -- suspects in a wide variety of crimes, from theft to murder.

“I stole 20 million cedis (CA$ 2,546) from my father…”admits one boy. “I was arrested because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” says another. “We are poor and have been neglected by our parents.”

The boys range in age from 12 to 17. While the remand house may be a place for detention, some think the conditions are too harsh and violate basic human rights. Registered nurse Mary Bah has been visiting the prisoners for close to 20 years. She says the state of the facility is deplorable. “The conditions are deteriorating. It’s in great need of a renovation.”

The rundown wooden structures where the children are kept are over 50 years old.

Human rights worker Jennifer Melvin is working to raise awareness about the home. She says she was shocked at the state in which the teenagers are kept.

“It’s broken into three rooms. One holds buckets of water, completely dark. The first time I went there, there was a boy sitting in the room. The floor was soaked with urine; it was hard to breathe absolutely atrocious.”

The boys sleep on the floor. The beds were taken away because they were using them as ladders to escape through the rotting roof.

“There was a time we were even supplying them with mosquito coils and there was a time they were using the coils to light the mattresses and set themselves a blaze. So if you are not careful, they will even something to get you in trouble.”
Social Services Program head Benjamin Otoo admits there are many problems at Asawase. He blames the aging building and a lack of resources. Otoo says that the Asawase remand house has been functioning on 1.8 million cedis (CA$ 229) since last January. The boys are supposed to eat three times a day, but a lack of funding is affecting the quality of care.

“The fact that someone has committed an offence doesn’t mean you can use feeding as a form of punishment, but because of the meagre funding, we cannot feed them properly,” he says.

Money isn’t the only problem. The boys are supposed to be at Asawase for two weeks, but Otoo says sometimes the police fail to pick them up and they end up staying over a month. They are not allowed outside for fear that they will run away. If they do escape, they face punishment.

“You see quite recently when some attempted to escape they were given some lashes. Some were given six lashes, some were given twelve,” explains the warden, Isaac Yeboah.

This is something that really troubles human rights advocates like Jennifer Melvin. “They are living in a truly appalling situation,” she says, ”which certainly contravenes a number of rights that have been ratified. We just need awareness and accountability.”

The department is lobbying the higher powers to address the issues at Asawase, but so far there has been little feedback. Meanwhile, the boys behind the bars are fantasizing about the day they will be released.

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