

MY NIGERIAN PRISON EXPERIENCE

Clever Akporherhe

Clever Akporherhe wrote “My Nigerian Prison Experience” after being released from Kirikiri Medium Security Prison. These experiences describe his time as a convicted prisoner. Since then, Clever has been arrested by the Nigerian Police Force and is currently serving time in Kirikiri Medium Security Prison on “awaiting trial” holding charges. He has verbally communicated that prison living conditions experienced by awaiting trial prisoners are far worse than those he experienced as a convicted prisoner.

I, Clever Akporherhe, stayed in Medium Security Prison for a period of one year and six months. On the day of my admission I became seriously sick. I complained to the officer or warden but I was told that I will be taken to the clinic on Monday. I arrived on Friday. In reality, I was never taken to the clinic.

On arrival, I was taken to the “welcome cell” meant for new inmates. There, the prison “INTERPOL” tortured us with whips and asked us to bend our heads while sitting on the floor. We were about 250 men, all new prisoners courtesy of “Operation Fire for Fire” [a police squad working the streets of Lagos]. We were locked up in a cell meant for 26 people. We sat like that for the most part of the day. At about 9:00 p.m., the General of the Prison with headphones and a walkie-talkie spoke to us and issued a warning that those of us with hidden money, whether in our anus, pockets, or anywhere else, should volunteer the money over to them immediately. Fear gripped me for the first time and I quickly dropped my N2,100 (equivalent of \$21 CDN), along with my Rapido wristwatch worth N2,500 (the equivalent of \$25 CDN). Upon release they gave me N300 (equivalent of \$3 CDN) and I never saw the watch again. At the time, several other persons dropped various sums of money. Later, we were all searched again and asked to excrete — for them, this was to “make sure” that no one was hiding money inside their anus.

The sleeping arrangements were terrible as we were lined up like sardines on the ground. We did not receive any food that day; they said that since we were “Alejos” — newcomers to prison — we were not entitled to eat yet. Inside the “welcome” cell, there was one big bucket of water for the 250 prisoners who were squatting like sardines. They were calling us up two at a time and giving us one cup of water each, which we had to drink

immediately and return to our spot. If you asked for a second cup of water they gave you a whip instead. We were not allowed to go near the bucket of water or even ease ourselves at the lavatory. Inside the cell, if one of us needed to use the toilet, a big plate was given to him to piss in before the convicted prisoners who are made to supervise the “welcome cell” poured it into the sink. This, they said, was meant to avoid making the sink smell bad, but in reality it was really meant to dehumanize their “new” prisoners.

We were woken up very early the next day, around 5:00 a.m., and asked to pray. Before the end of prayer, the “morning baked beans” as they call them, were brought to us. Not more than 20 beans with dry garri¹² scattered on the top. We were not allowed to wash our hands before and after eating; no utensils were provided. Two hours later we were brought out and given cutlasses (machetes) to clear the area where a lot of human waste was buried and grass had overgrown. After the morning’s back breaking labour we were taken back to the “welcome cell” without bathing.

The warders and officials are not very friendly unless they feel they can get something from you. They are usually friendly if they know that “your people”¹³ will be coming to visit you — they hope to get a piece of whatever your people bring for you.

There was time while I was in prison that all the mango and fruit trees in the yard got chopped down due to the unavailability of firewood for cooking. The contractor supplying the wood had brought nothing. So, used tires and fresh wood was used to cook, and this took a long time to prepare the food for the 2400 prisoners of Kirikiri Medium Prison at the time. This is a prison built to accommodate 788 people. While the shortage of firewood was going on in the prison, they served dry garri twice a day — once in the afternoon and once in the evening for about three months, our food supply was getting smaller and smaller because they did not have a means of cooking for us. Even before this situation, a lot of the prisoners, especially the ATM (Awaiting Trial Males) were underfed and looked very undernourished.

Before the shortage in firewood, the main food there was dry garri soaked in water from wells contaminated with larva: worms and insects can clearly be seen in the water with the naked eye. As for the health clinic

¹² A staple carbohydrate in Nigerian diet.

¹³ Family or friends.

there is nothing to write home about. It's a mere dispensary unit: no doctors examine prisoners, all complaints are met with tablets (pills) when they are available — this for prisoners who are fortunate enough to visit the clinic. Any prisoner that wants to go to the clinic must make it to prayers on time; any latecomers are denied medical help. Those prisoners that are fortunate enough to have visits from their families or friends and are fortunate enough to get medicine from them have this medicine seized by the prison officers at the gate. They confiscate it stating that the doctor did not prescribe it in the hospital, even though doctors rarely examine prisoners in the clinic. After confiscating the drugs, they never help you to go to the clinic for medical assistance. Only one person is taken from each cell for treatment each day: it doesn't matter how many people in that cell need medical attention.

Daily reports of death from various cells frightened me and one day, I complained to the authorities about our living conditions. I was immediately taken to the solitary cells called "Angola." These are cells where prisoners are punished for one offence or the other. The cells are built for one person but they cram in about six or seven people. My survival was due to the Christian churches that come for fellowship and brought in food items.

Most of the food meant for the prisoners' consumption is being carted away by the officers. Aside from that, the same warders who are supposed to "correct" us, in turn supply bunches of Indian hemp (marijuana) for prisoners who in turn sell the drugs to other prisoners on a retail basis. After being divided into "pinches" as they call it, a wrap of Indian hemp worth N10 in the free world could be sold for N60 inside.

The conditions now are ones that don't provide clean drinking water, there is no good toilet system, no proper medical aid, overcrowding, and too much torture being done to prisoners by the warders. Even on Sundays, prisoners are asked to manually clear grass for labour. The conditions are dehumanizing and fatal. In view of the above mentioned facts, I appeal to the general public and to this audience to do something in view of those presently imprisoned in Nigeria.