



The Professional Trades Union for Prison, Correctional & Secure Psychiatric Workers

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29th April 2020

Dear Justice Minister,

CONCERN OVER PRISON SITUATION IN COLOMBIA

The POA trade union for workers in Britain's prison system is extremely concerned at the impact of the coronavirus in Colombian prisons, where it poses a grave threat to the lives of workers and prisoners.

With more than 28,500 members, the POA is the principal trade union for workers in public prisons, private prisons, immigration detention centres and secure hospital settings. Several members of our National Executive Committee have visited Colombia and its prisons with delegations of the British-Irish organisation Justice for Colombia, including our General Secretary Steve Gillan. In August 2018, our National Chair Mark Fairhurst visited La Picota prison in Bogota together with other JFC delegates including Jo Stevens, an MP in the British Parliament.

We are fully aware of the overcrowding in Colombian prisons and the devastating effect of potential outbreaks of coronavirus. The British government have taken steps during this crisis to have cells allocated as single occupancy only. It is vital that prisoner support groups and families' warnings over the volatile situation are addressed and all steps possible are taken to implement suitable sanitary protocols and reduce the overcrowding.

The deaths of three inmates at the Villavicencio prison, and the infection of several others, demonstrates the urgent need to address the humanitarian crisis in Colombian prisons. We understand that as of today there are at least 300 confirmed cases in Villavicencio as well as several other prisons, including La Picota. The health of prisoners is not only important for their own wellbeing, but also for that of the prison workers who also face severe risks at this time. It is paramount that infection control measures are observed, with social distancing being a huge part of these controls. Isolating prisoners who have contracted the virus plays a part along with shielding of the most vulnerable to reduce deaths.

We are extremely worried over the ongoing detention of 158 fully accredited FARC former guerrillas who to date remain incarcerated despite the inclusion of amnesty laws in the 2016 peace agreement. By releasing these prisoners, you will create much needed space that will allow infection control measures to be implemented. Our own government has embarked on early release programmes. The POA welcomes your government's decree which will allow for the release of certain prisoners, but we also appeal to you, while recognising the roles of different ministries, to extend that decree to apply to signatories to the peace agreement.

We ask that you take necessary measures to minimise the risk of coronavirus by ensuring prison staff are always provided with necessary protective equipment to carry out their duties safely. Additionally, we ask that you facilitate contact between families and human rights organisations with the prisoners in order to reach positive solutions to this current situation.

Yours Sincerely



STEVE GILLAN
General Secretary

Yours Sincerely



MARK FAIRHURST
National Chair

C.C.

Brigadier General Norberto Mujica Jaime, Director INPEC
Ambassador Jose Ardila, Colombian Ambassador to the UK
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