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**Zambia prison conditions spreading HIV, TB: report**

By REUTERS

Poor living conditions and lack of proper medical care in Zambian prisons are encouraging the spread of HIV and tuberculosis among inmates, a study showed on Tuesday.

The report by three human rights groups including Human Rights Watch said the exposure of prisoners to deadly drug-resistant strains of HIV and TB in overcrowded cells threatened the lives of both inmates and the general public.

The report, "Unjust and Unhealthy: HIV, TB, and Abuse in Zambian Prisons", said some prisoners were detained for years in such conditions even before being brought to trial.

"The conditions in TB isolation cells are life-threatening, yet inmates who have completed TB treatment choose to continue sleeping in the cells with prisoners with active TB because they are less crowded than general population cells," it said.

Some 16 percent of Zambia's total population is HIV positive and 1 million have full-blown AIDS. The rate of tuberculosis infection is also 16 percent, but HIV-related TB is even higher, according to health ministry data.

Zambia's prisons service employs only 14 healthcare workers to serve 15,300 inmates, and only 15 of the country's 86 prisons have clinics or sick bays, according to the study.

"People are dying," said Godfrey Malembeka, a former prisoner and prison rights activist who heads a local human rights group that was part of the study.

Testing for HIV -- last measured at 27 percent among inmates -- and treatment for AIDS have improved at some prisons, but a ban on condoms in prisons, introduced to discourage intercourse and homosexuality, makes prevention impossible, the report said.

"Sexual abuse is common, and children are particularly vulnerable to rape by adult inmates in their cells," it said.

The report said the food provided by the government was so inadequate that it had become a commodity traded for sex.