

UN expert: AIDS crisis in the world's prisons

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Protesters demand more support for AIDS victims at a protest in Vienna, Austria, on Tuesday, July 20, 2010. (AP Photo/Ronald Zak)

(AP) -- The U.N.'s top investigator on torture and punishment warned Friday that overcrowded prisons are breeding grounds for AIDS.

Often, inmates are held in inhumane conditions in which the HIV virus is spread through the use of non-sterile drug injection equipment, sexual contacts, tattooing and sharing of razors, Manfred Nowak said.

"There is a global prison crisis," he told an international AIDS conference.

Nowak, who has visited detention facilities around the world, urged authorities to inform prisoners of the risk of HIV transmission and to offer them free condoms, HIV testing and counseling. He also pressed prisons to offer needle and syringe programs, opiate substitution therapies and methadone treatments.

"Science tells us exactly what we have to do, it's just a question of political will to implement it," Nowak said.

In addition, prison guards should live up to their

obligation to prevent rape and other forms of coercion that thrive in packed environments.

"One of the most important measures to prevent HIV transmission would be the reduction of overcrowding," since it leads to violence and conditions that are conducive to the spread of the virus, he added.

Nowak said that, although reliable figures are hard to come by, the prevalence of HIV in prisons is generally much higher than in a country's wider population.

In Ukraine, for example, the prevalence of HIV in prison is at least 10 times that of the overall population, he said.

Dmytro Shermebey of the All-Ukrainian Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS - who was diagnosed with HIV, tuberculosis and hepatitis after spending nine years in a Ukrainian jail - stressed that inmates have a right to both treatment and protection from the disease.

"They have the right because they are human," Shermebey said.

While about 10 million people are incarcerated every year, some 30 million enter and leave prisons annually - making it a public health problem for society, according to Nowak.

"Prison health is public health," he said.

More information: AIDS conference: <http://www.aids2010.org/>

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