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The Parliamentary Ombudsman Norway

**National Preventive Mechanism against
Torture and Ill-Treatment**

VISIT REPORT

- Summary and Recommendations

**Ringerike prison
6-9 January 2015**



The National Preventive Mechanism's Visit to Ringerike Prison

6-9 January 2015

The Parliamentary Ombudsman's preventive role

After Norway's ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT) in the summer of 2013, the Parliamentary Ombudsman was given a mandate to prevent torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.¹ To fulfil this mandate, a special unit called the National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) was established in the Parliamentary Ombudsman's office.

Representatives of the NPM make regular visits to locations where people are deprived of their liberty, such as prisons, police custody facilities, psychiatric institutions and child welfare institutions. The visits may be announced or unannounced.

On the basis of these visits, recommendations are issued with the aim of preventing torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

The Parliamentary Ombudsman, through the NPM, is authorised to enter all places of detention and to engage in private conversations with those who have been deprived of their liberty. The NPM also has access to all essential information relating to detention conditions. Through independent observation and dialogue conducted during its visits, the NPM seeks to uncover risk factors that could open the way for abuses to occur. Conversations with persons deprived of their liberty are given special priority.

The NPM also conducts extensive dialogue with national authorities, civil society groups and international human rights bodies.

Summary of visit report

Norway's National Preventive Mechanism (NPM), a unit of the Parliamentary Ombudsman, visited Ringerike prison from 6 to 9 January 2015. The prison's ordinary capacity is 160 cells. All of the inmates are men. The prison is also required to maintain five double cells, giving a total capacity of 165 spaces. The prison is a high-security facility, and primarily houses remand and long-term inmates.

The prison administration and other staff assisted the NPM readily during the visit. The inmate-information posters sent to the prison in advance of the NPM's visit were on display in all sections, and staff appeared to be well informed of the visit. The NPM's information brochures, in various languages, had been distributed to inmates in all sections. The NPM received thorough reports and all requested information prior to the visit.

The visit to Ringerike prison opened with a meeting with the prison administration, during which the NPM presented the Parliamentary Ombudsman's prevention mandate and the methodology for prison visits. An inspection of the prison was then conducted, including of the prison's different

¹ The Parliamentary Ombudsman Act § 3a.

sections, means of restraint, reception department, workshops, activities centre, health department, visiting rooms and community rooms for inmates.

Conversations were held with almost all inmates in the restricted section (section A), and with 42 per cent of inmates in the communal sections (sections B, C and D). The conversations were conducted in the inmates' cells or in meeting rooms in the different sections. A review was conducted of all key documents, including use-of-force protocols relating to the use of security cells in 2014 and up to the NPM's visit on 6 January 2015. A selection of written decisions on the exclusion of inmates from the company of others during the same period was also reviewed. In addition, the NPM talked with staff members at different levels of the organisation, as well as with union representatives. The visit concluded with a meeting with the prison administration, during which the NPM presented its preliminary findings and recommendations.

The visit showed that the use of coercive measures and exclusion from company was well documented through written decisions, supervision logs and the keeping of records. The written decisions satisfied the requirement to give the grounds for actions taken, and recorded whether less stringent measures had been tried. The written decisions and records also showed that partial exclusion from company was often used as an alternative to full exclusion. However, high occupancy at the prison means that both new inmates and inmates transferred from the communal sections to the restricted section (section A) on the basis of written decisions concerning exclusion from company remain in the restricted section far longer than anticipated. It also emerged that the majority of the inmates in section A experienced a high degree of isolation. The generally high number of inmates without an offer of activity at the prison gave grounds for concern.

Prison officers maintained a strong presence in the living sections, and most of the inmates reported feeling safe in communal areas. Although the inmates generally seemed to be satisfied with the prison officers, it became clear that the contact officer scheme for section A needs to be strengthened and that steps need to be taken to ensure that inmates receive comprehensive information on admission.

The NPM requested a separate review of the procedures for preventing suicide and self-harm. A need was identified for better communication within the Correctional Services, at Ringerike prison and between the police and the Correctional Services. Further, the prison should reinforce its suicide-prevention routines, particularly in connection with admission. The NPM noted that the prison had begun work on these issues.

Many inmates expressed frustration at what they perceived to be a strict control regime. Among their concerns were the way in which visits are regulated, the opportunity to make telephone calls and the denial of applications for home leave.

The NPM has several recommendations concerning the health services provided at Ringerike prison. The majority of the inmates stated that access to the prison health service was inadequate, and many stated that they had lost confidence in the health department.

Foreign inmates and inmates with an immigrant background whose family members and other relatives do not speak Norwegian or English reported clear limitations on their opportunities for

contact with close relatives. These inmates were only granted telephone time once a month for conversations that were monitored by an interpreter.

On the basis of the findings made during its visit, the NPM issues the following recommendations:

- The prison and the police should cooperate on a review of the procedures governing the flow of information and coordination of activities related to the transfer of vulnerable detainees (including those at risk of suicide) to prison, to ensure their safety.
- Admission and reception forms should ask explicit questions about the inmate's mental health and risk of suicide.
- The prison should always be informed when a suicide risk becomes apparent at the police custody facility. The prison should have clear routines for handling such information to ensure the safety of vulnerable inmates.
- A full body search on entering a security cell should only be carried out if an individual risk assessment has been conducted. This assessment should be recorded in the supervision log.
- The prison should be particularly cautious about deciding to exclude an inmate from company if the situation at the prison may mean that the inmate will be isolated for longer than indicated by the original reason given for the exclusion.
- The prison should avoid discriminating against inmates on the basis of religious or ethical belief. Inmates who do not attend the prison's church service should not thereby suffer a reduction in time spent with others.
- The prison should implement measures to ensure that all inmates have the opportunity to spend at least eight hours per day outside their cells, occupied in meaningful activities, unless they have been excluded from company (full isolation) pursuant to section 186a of the Criminal Procedure Act or section 37 of the Execution of Sentences Act. Special measures should be implemented for inmates who are completely or partially excluded from company.
- The prison should ensure sufficient telephone availability, and organise the allocation of telephone time so that all inmates have at least 20 minutes of telephone time a week.
- The prison should ensure that inmates receive satisfactory information on admission. Consideration should be given to the introduction of a system for following up on the first admissions interview to ensure that inmates receive the help and information they need.
- For all inmates who lack sufficient skill in Norwegian or English, the prison should offer to provide an interpreter at the admissions interview and at later times when essential information is to be given. The question "Do you need an interpreter?" should be posed in multiple languages so there is no doubt it has been understood.
- The prison should strengthen the contact officer scheme for section A. Specifically, the focus should be on meeting the needs of isolated inmates, inmates with a particular need for assistance and vulnerable groups even when the contact officer is not at work.
- The prison should always be focused on the balance between personal progression and control measures.
- New inmates should undergo a health examination by a physician, or a nurse under the supervision of a physician, preferably in connection with the admissions interview or within 24 hours. It is also proposed that all new inmates arriving at the prison after working hours should undergo a health examination by a physician in the local accident and emergency centre.

- All health-related requests (called *samtalelapper*) addressed to the health department should be responded to within 24 hours on weekdays and on Mondays in the case of requests made during the weekend. The health department should develop a system to ensure that all health-related requests and any replies are recorded in the electronic patient journal. The reply from the health department should specify an appointment time for the inmate to see a physician.
- The prison should ensure that a prison officer is assigned to the health department throughout its opening hours, so that as many patients as possible can be seen.
- It is recommended that the prison chaplain's office be assigned a location that does not reduce the capacity of the health department or create potential confusion among inmates as to the respective roles of the chaplain and the health department.
- The prison should ensure that all requests or inquiries to the health department, including to the dentist, physiotherapist and psychologist, are treated confidentially. Inmates should be informed that they may put health-related requests in sealed envelopes, and envelopes should be easily accessible to all. On the health-related request form, the space provided for a prison officer's signature should be deleted immediately.
- The prison's health department should ensure that its contact details are easily accessible online, so that confidential health information from external parties can be sent directly to the department.
- Arrangements should be made to enable inmates with relatives unable to speak Norwegian or English to call their relatives more frequently than once a month.
- The prison should consider introducing food-procurement systems to ensure that inmates' nutritional needs are met satisfactorily.

The full visit report from Ringerike prison in Norwegian can be found on the website of the NPM [here](#).



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