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Pakistani prisons house 77,275 inmates against authorised capacity of 57,742

Federal ombudsman orders special measures for prisoners

Rizwan Shehzad | March 25, 2020 | 3 min read

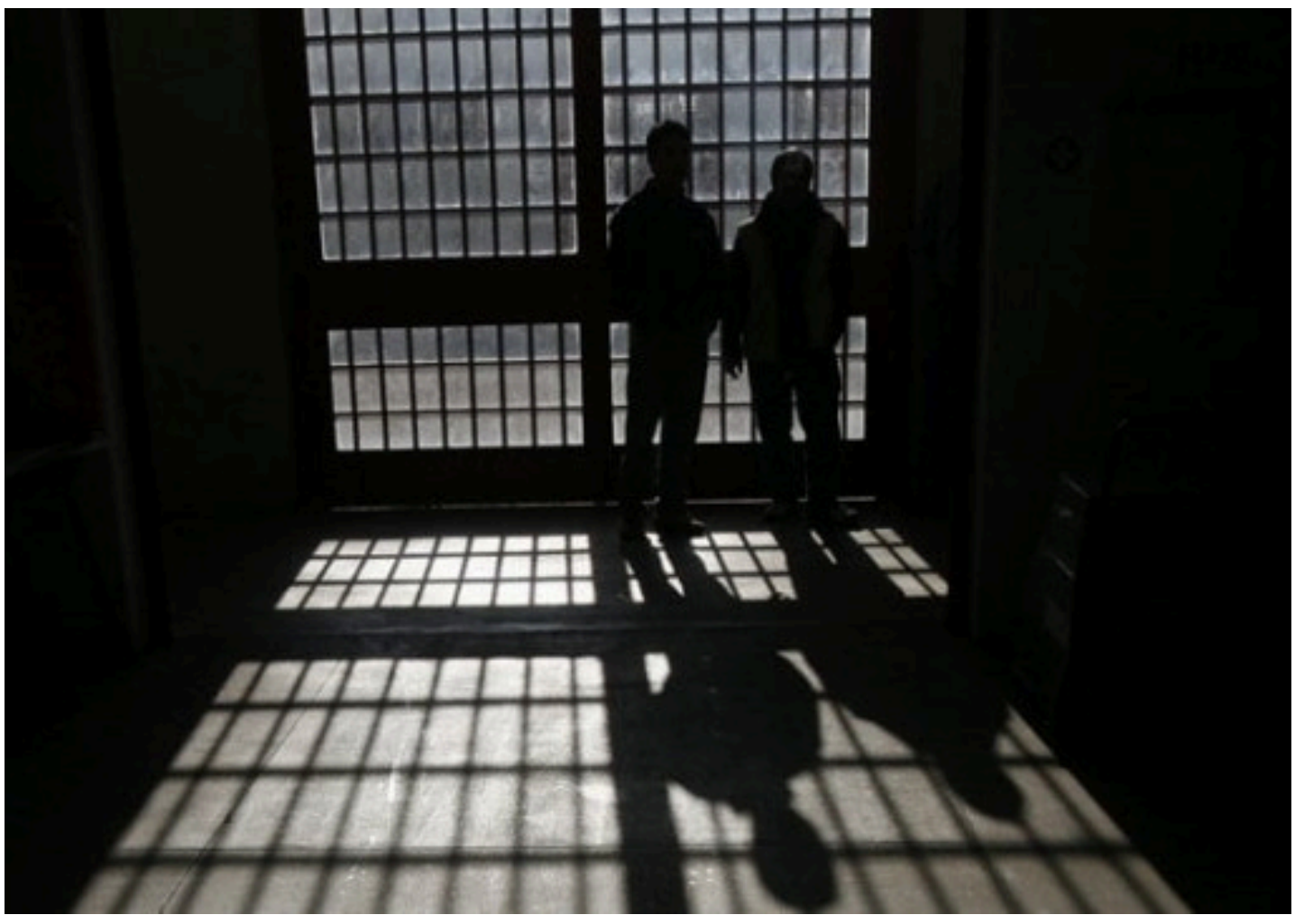


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ISLAMABAD:

The federal ombudsman on Tuesday directed the provincial chief and home secretaries as well as inspectors general of jails across the country to take special measures in all prisons in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.

The directions were given in a letter issued by federal ombudsman's senior advisor and grievance commissioner for overseas Pakistanis Hafiz Ahsaan Ahmad Khokhar to the provincial authorities, besides seeking a quarterly report on prison reforms.

Khokhar urged the prison authorities to keep the jails clean in the wake of COVID-19 outbreak, while taking special care of elderly inmates, women, children living with their mothers and juvenile offenders.

It stated that medical screening of new inmates be ensured at the time of admission and anyone suspected of carrying the symptoms of virus be shifted to the isolation centre immediately for treatment.

It read that coordination between the federal and provincial health departments be made in case of emergency.

While referring to prison reforms, Khokhar stated that wafaqi mohtasib (ombudsman) secretariat had earlier submitted recommendations for the improvement of conditions in jails, adding that the Supreme Court had not only endorsed the recommendations but also ordered submission of implementation report after every three months.

While reminding the authorities concerned that the next report was due and needed to be submitted before the top court, he directed them to submit the compliance report to the federal ombudsman by April 6.

Prison population

According to the fourth implementation report of the federal ombudsman secretariat in the suo moto case No1 of 2006, the Justice Project Pakistan (JPP)'s recent report said that there were 77,275 prisoners in Pakistani prisons against the authorised capacity of 57,742 prisoners in Sindh, Punjab, KP and Balochistan.

"This is 34% more than the official capacity," it said.

"Due to the unprecedented rate of spread of the virus coupled with its high mortality rate, the Pakistani government must devise a coherent approach to protect its prison population, totaling over 77,275 prisoners," the JPP report read.

"Should the government fail to act now, Pakistani prisons and detention centers will become epicenters for the transmission of COVID-19," it added.

While referring to the report of the commission constituted by the Islamabad High Court, the JPP stated that there were currently 1,500 prisoners who were above the age of 60.

"There is a high risk of coronavirus to old individuals in incarceration. Their advanced age, coupled with the challenges of practicing even the most basic disease prevention measures in prison, is a potentially lethal combination," the document said.

The JPP report stated that a total of 1,204 female and 1,248 juveniles had been imprisoned in Pakistan jails adding that 83 mothers with 90 children were in various prisons of Punjab and 37 mothers with 50 children in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

"Women with children represent a vulnerable section of Pakistan's prison population who should be considered for immediate release in the wake of COVID-19," the JPP suggested.

The IHC report had found that almost 2,400 prisoners already suffer from contagious diseases such as hepatitis, HIV and tuberculosis.

There are 2,100 inmates with physical ailments and 600 with mental illnesses, while in Punjab alone there are 66 disabled prisoners.

Out of Pakistan's total prison population (77,275), 65% of all detainees are currently undergoing trial.

“This means that 48,008 prisoners out of Pakistan’s prison population have not yet been convicted,” the report said.

The JPP suggested reducing overcrowding in prisons, identifying and considering conditional release of particularly vulnerable, at-risk prisoners, including elderly prisoners, prisoners with existing medical conditions or physical and mental disabilities, women and children.

While requesting to implement measures to safeguard health, hygiene and sanitation needs of prisoners, the JPP sought access to competent medical professionals and isolating affected prisoners to contain the spread of the virus.

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