

# Inside the jails of Duterte's drug war

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As Duterte's 'war on drugs' continues, **Marielle van Uitert** and **Jannie Schipper** document the brutality from the streets and cells of the Philippines

'Good morning *po!*' From their stuffy cell in Las Piñas prison in Manila, the men in their uniform yellow shirts greet the wardens in choir with the traditional term of respect.

A hairy leg peeps from underneath the bunk bed, someone's hand sticks out through the bars. Each mattress holds at least four inmates. Some are lying on the floor. Due to the lack of space, they have to take turns sleeping.

Before 2016, prisons in the Philippines were already overcrowded. But since president Rodrigo Duterte's 'war on drugs' started, the situation in prisons in and around Manila has become extreme.



*A member of the forensic team has placed a sign where a bullet was found next to Mark David Sta Cera (34), an alleged drug addict shot by unknown assailants.*



*A man lights a candle in the street where fifteen bullets killed a suspected drug pusher.*

His 'Operation Double Barrel' has resulted in up to 12,000 people, from drug addicts to pushers, being killed, according to human rights organizations' estimates: the police put the count at around 3,000. Thousands of others have been jailed. Court cases drag on for years, rehabilitation schedules hardly take off. In Quezon City Jail, for example, this has led to an *official* occupancy rate of 1,075 per cent.

'If the police do their job, we have a problem here,' says warden Maria Laguo.



*Women waiting to be transported after their arrest in their house in Quezon City, which was allegedly used as a drug den.*



*Since there is no room for a community area in the female dorm of Las Piñas Jail, inmates have their daily activities in their cell.*

## **On trial for six years**

With her toothless smile, short black hair and frail posture, 'Pepo' Marebeth Debi looks older than her 42 years. She is a veteran in Quezon City Jail's female dorm.

'When I came here six years ago, there were around 400 inmates,' Pepo says. 'Now the population has almost tripled.'

She and her family are charged with selling drugs. Her husband is incarcerated in another jail: she only sees him from time to time in a court hearing. These hearings have been dragging on for six years now. According to the jail authority's own statistics, only some 2 per cent of all people in detention have actually been convicted.



*A funeral parlour transports the body of a shooting victim from the crime scene.*



*Relatives kiss Bryan Delos Reyes Dellarosa (26) in his coffin. Bryan was a drug addict and was killed in a police operation.*

Over the years, Pepo has obtained a more or less comfortable position inside the prison. 'My fellow inmates call me 'mami', she says. 'And I sleep in a bed, not on the floor like some newcomers.'

She even manages to earn some money for her six children – who live with their grandparents – by washing clothes, cleaning toilets and selling food inside the facility.

Prisons like Quezon City Jail (3,081 inmates) and Manila City Jail (5,307 inmates) have become almost like complete towns – albeit in miniature. Inmates are doing fitness exercises, repairing floors, playing basketball. They can attend school classes – 'Yes, the silence required for their exams is difficult to realize here,' says a warden with a sense of understatement – or daily church services from one of the many religious communities who send volunteers to the jails; learn handicrafts; or go to the barber.



*Drug suspects hiding their faces when they are arrested at their home in Pasay, Manila.*



*The female dorms in Quezon City Jail are almost as overcrowded as the male dorms.*

## **Gang rules**

Alex, a 35-year-old former soldier, sits at the basketball court watching the game. Without a single line on his arms, he's an exception: most inmates have symbols of their gangs tattooed on their arms and chests, as well as lovers' names and other drawings and texts.

'You choose your gang at the police station where you are arrested,' Alex explains. 'It's a brotherhood, it offers protection.'

Inmates are not only subject to the wardens' authority, but also – and maybe more so – to their leaders' rules. Quezon City Jail is organized along gang lines. When the 'Commandos' are occupying the basketball court, the 'Bahalana gang' members are supposed to stay inside their cells. 'We would like it differently, but that would give trouble,' says a warden.

As a 'martial' for one of the leading gangs, Alex is responsible for mediating between his comrades and other gangs in case of disputes.

'For example, people try to steal each others' visitors,' he says.

'Many people don't have visitors at all, so sometimes, if someone's partner comes to visit, a member of another gang tries to get her instead.'

Alex's own wife went back to their native province

Mindanao when he was arrested. He has never seen his son, who is now six years old.



*Most detainees in a police station in Malate, Manila, have gang symbols and other drawings tattooed on their body.*



*Inmates watch TV from their beds in Manila City Jail.*

## Home or prison forever

For many inmates, the prison has become their home. But they still hope to see the outside world someday.

‘I want to be with my children,’ says Pepo. ‘I saw my youngest daughter last week. She was four when I got in, now she’s 10. She’s become so big.’ Alex hopes to have his final hearing in a month’s time. ‘Then it will be home, or prison forever.’



*Protesters at the national police headquarters hold signs with the name of a teenager who was killed by police.*



*People light candles for victims of extrajudicial killings at a protest at the national police headquarters in Quezon City.*

For president Duterte, getting people like Alex and Pepo back into society is certainly not a priority.

‘Ours is unlike positivist theory wherein those who served time in prison can be rehabilitated,’ he claimed in a recent speech. ‘They don’t want to be out of prison...they are already monsters.’

*Text by Jannie Schipper, all photos by Marielle van Uitert.*