

REPORTS AND DOCUMENTS

ICRC report on the visit to “Robbeneiland” (Robben Island) Prison on the 1st May, 1964, by Mr G. Hoffmann, Delegate General of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Africa

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On 1 May 1964, Georg Hoffmann, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Delegate General in Africa, inspected Robben Island Prison, where some twenty days earlier Nelson Mandela was visited for the first time. Having access to political prisoners in apartheid South Africa, the ICRC sought to ensure that detainees lived in decent conditions and were treated humanely. The following is the report of the detention visit conducted by Georg Hoffmann. The document provides a detailed overview of the living conditions, work and medical treatment of detainees, as well as recommendations given to prison authorities after the visit. The report was confidential at the time of writing. It was made public in 2004 and is reproduced for the first time here in the *Review*.

The ICRC is well known for its work on behalf of people deprived of liberty in connection with armed conflicts and other situations of violence. Also in other circumstances, the ICRC takes action wherever it can, with the aim of securing humane treatment and conditions of detention for all detainees, preventing torture and other forms of ill-treatment, preventing and addressing disappearances, improving detention conditions, restoring and maintaining family contacts, and ensuring respect for legal safeguards. To that end, the ICRC bases its work upon a comprehensive assessment of the situation both inside and outside places of detention, facilitated by constructive, confidential dialogue with the authorities and visits places of detention.¹

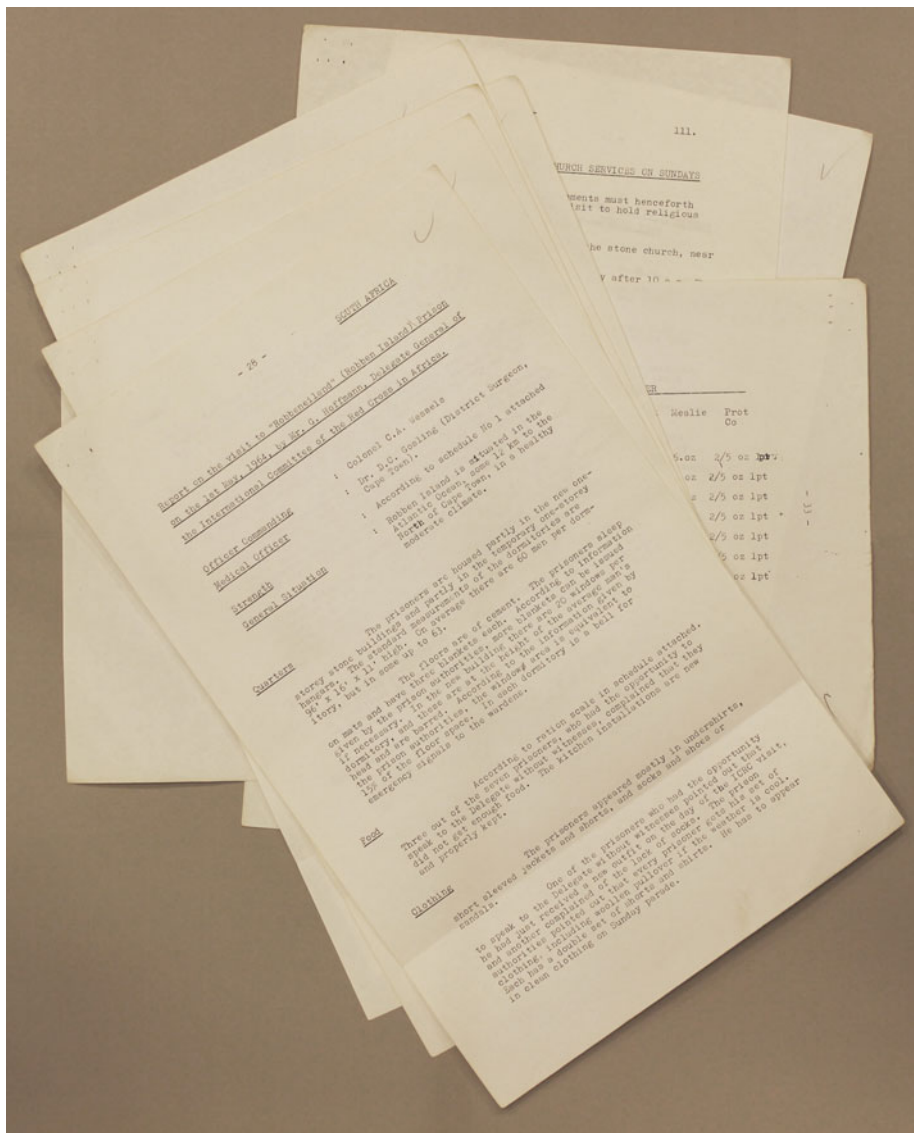
ICRC Historical Archives

The following document comes from the ICRC Archives. The ICRC historical archives collect and preserve ICRC documents dating from the organization's inception to the present day, and make them available for research. The ICRC's historical archives, run by professional archivists and historians, comprise 6,700 linear metres of textual records and a collection of photographs, films and other audio archives.

The ICRC's public archives represent an essential historical source for surveying, studying and debating contemporary and diplomatic history, more particularly in the field of humanitarian operations and their impact on States, societies, cultures and armed conflicts or other situations of violence.

The public archives cover the history of the ICRC since its foundation in 1863 to 1975, and are available for consultation, by appointment. If you wish to consult the ICRC Historical Archives in Geneva, you may schedule an appointment via email at publicarchives@icrc.org.

1 For more information on the ICRC's approach and action when carrying out prison visits, see ICRC, "What We Do for Detainees", available at: www.icrc.org/en/document/what-we-do-detainees.



Archival source: ICRC Archives, B AG 225.005-007. Photos © Sarah Roxas/ICRC.

Report on the visit to "Robbeneiland" (Robben Island) Prison
on the 1st May, 1964, by Mr. G. Hoffmann, Delegate General of
the International Committee of the Red Cross in Africa.

Officer Commanding : Colonel C.A. Wessels
Medical Officer : Dr. D.C. Gosling (District Surgeon,
Cape Town).
Strength : According to schedule No 1 attached
General Situation : Robben Island is situated in the
Atlantic Ocean, some 12 km to the
North of Cape Town, in a healthy
moderate climate.

Quarters

The prisoners are housed partly in the new one-storey stone buildings and partly in the temporary one-storey hangars. The standard measurements of the dormitories are 96' x 16' x 11' high. On average there are 60 men per dormitory, but in some up to 63.

The floors are of cement. The prisoners sleep on mats and have three blankets each. According to information given by the prison authorities, more blankets can be issued if necessary. In the new building there are 20 windows per dormitory, and these are at the height of the average man's head and are barred. According to the information given by the prison authorities, the window area is equivalent to 15% of the floor space. In each dormitory is a bell for emergency signals to the wardens.

Food

According to ration scale in schedule attached. Three out of the seven prisoners, who had the opportunity to speak to the Delegate without witnesses, complained that they did not get enough food. The kitchen installations are new and properly kept.

Clothing

The prisoners appeared mostly in undershirts, short sleeved jackets and shorts, and socks and shoes or sandals.

One of the prisoners who had the opportunity to speak to the Delegate without witnesses pointed out that he had just received a new outfit on the day of the ICRC visit, and another complained of the lack of socks. The prison authorities pointed out that every prisoner gets his set of clothing, including woollen pullover if the weather is cool. Each has a double set of shorts and shirts. He has to appear in clean clothing on Sunday parade.

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Hygiene

Adjacent to the dormitories and included within the area in which the prisoners are locked in in the evening, are cold shower facilities, other washing facilities and W.C. installations.

Medical Attention

A district medical officer visits the prison daily. There is an infirmary in the temporary prison buildings. On the day of the visit there were 12 patients confined to bed, most of them down with "Flu". All wore brown pyjamas and had sheets and blankets on their beds.

According to the doctor there are no epidemics or serious diseases on the island. Serious cases are evacuated to the non-European Somerset Hospital in Cape Town. The doctor stated that the whole population of the prison is X-rayed at least once a year to prevent T.B. spreading, and all are vaccinated against smallpox and typhoid. The doctor is assisted by three orderlies and one male nurse (all Europeans).

One of the prisoners interviewed by the Delegate without witnesses, Nathaniel Cilliwe, aged 32, who is having treatment in the camp infirmary because of a swollen calf (veins) wanted to see a specialist. This request was conveyed to the Prison Commander, Col. Wessels, by the Delegate. Colonel Wessels answered that Dr. Gosling is trying another treatment and that if this is not successful he will consult a specialist.

Deaths

According to prison authorities there have been three deaths since the 1st January, 1963, only one of whom was a "political prisoner", who died of heart disease. One prisoner drowned while endeavouring to escape, and one was shot whilst attacking another prisoner.

Religious Service

There is a special church available to all prisoners. A Chaplain from one of the protestant churches visits once a month except in December when he makes three visits. (See appendices 3 and 4).

Recreation and Study

No facilities are provided.

Work

The prisoners work from 0800 hrs to 1300 hrs and from 1400 hrs to 1700 hrs, (including the walk to and from the place of work).

The following types of work are undertaken:- Quarry, masonry, carpentry, painting, workshop, cooking, waiting in the Officers Mess, excavating, husbandry (pigs, cows).

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Skilled workers are generally employed in their trades; unskilled labourers are given the opportunity to learn a trade, subject to good behaviour. On release from prison they are given a diploma which does not show their prison background.

The hardest labour is in the quarry. Prisoners are issued with protective glasses.

Financial Resources

Only prisoners who have advanced to the grade of Monitor can earn some money - up to R1 per month.

Correspondence

The permission to correspond differs according to the group to which the prisoner belongs. There are four groups:-

A is the lightest security degree
B is medium security
C and D are maximum security

Group A can write and receive three letters per month
Group B can write and receive one letter per month
Group C can write and receive one letter every three months
Group D can write and receive one letter every six months

Not included in these restrictions are letters to legal advisers and letters on compassionate grounds (family emergencies).

Visits

Group A prisoners are allowed to receive visits from two persons twice a month, (contact visits).

Group B prisoners are allowed to receive a visit from two persons once a month (non-contact visits).

Group C prisoners are allowed to receive a visit from one person once in three months (non-contact visits).

Group D prisoners are allowed to receive a visit from one person in six months (non-contact visits).

The visits by lawyers are not included in the above.

The visits are limited to half an hour's duration.

Prisoners are graded according to behaviour in prison. Once a year every prisoner has to appear before a Prison Board. Political prisoners on Robben Island are still not graded higher than categories C and D.

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Treatment

At various working places the Delegate picked out a total of seven political prisoners, at random, for a personal interview without witnesses. Three of them complained that they are beaten by some warders.

The Delegate pointed out these complaints to the Commanding Officer, and the latter declared that he does not tolerate beating of prisoners, and that in fact beating of prisoners is prohibited. He had already reprimanded two warders who had been named by the prisoners concerned.

General Remarks

Robben Island can, as a whole, be considered a hard labour prison, as the island situation provides the necessary security background for open air labour for prisoners who otherwise would be behind bars most of the time.

As to the morale of the prisoners, the outward expression appears to be rather grim; no one seems to smile.

The political category is not separated from the ordinary criminals. The prison authorities informed the Delegate that there are four gangs amongst the hard bitten prisoners, which tend to terrorise their fellow prisoners, and might even go so far as to "sentence" fellow prisoners to death.

The Delegate mentioned the problems of the gangs to the Chief Commissioner of the Prison Department, General Steyn, who is an international penalist, and General Steyn told the Delegate that he was studying the problem of gangs and the possibility of eliminating this danger.

There has been one case where a young prisoner was homosexually assaulted by an older criminal. This case was discussed in Parliament in Cape Town. The young prisoner concerned was picked out by the Delegate for interview. He had been transferred to another compound.

Three out of the seven prisoners complained to the Delegate that they had no opportunity to continue their studies.

Considering the above described situation, the Delegate recommended to the Commanding Officer and to the Chief Commissioner of the Prison Department, General Steyn, that at least the less dangerous political prisoners be separated from the ordinary criminals, and that the younger ones particularly be given the opportunity to study. General Steyn informed the Delegate that screening in this respect was already on the way in Robben Island and such prisoners were being transferred to an Agricultural Prison in the Western Cape Province (See report concerning the Prison Victor Verster near Faarl).

It appears that a rather high percentage of young men are among the political detainees.

N.B. The Delegate was accompanied on this visit by Lt. Col. Schutte from the Prison Department.

H/Robbery

Murder	57
Culpable Homicide	27
Robbery	64
Rape	9
Assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm	33
Fraud	2
Housebreaking and theft	186
Stock-theft	5
Motorcar theft	13
Theft	74
In possession of dagger	2
Conspiracy to murder	11
Sabotage	284
Offences in terms of the Suppression of Communism Act, 1950, the Public Safety Act, 1953, the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1953, the Riotous Assemblies Act, 1956 and the Unlawful Org- anizations Act, 1960) 628
	<u>1,395</u>

DIETIC SCALE: BANTU PRISONERS: COMPILED BY THE
DEPARTMENT OF NUTRITION

	<u>BREAKFAST</u>			<u>LUNCH</u>				<u>DINNER</u>			
	Mealie Meal	Protone sauce	Sugar	Coffee Tea	Samp.	Pwaz mashis	Meat	Beans	Veg.	Mealie	Prot Co
Sunday	6.oz.	2/5 oz	1 1/2 oz	1 pt.	8.oz.	1.7/9 oz	5.oz.	-	8.oz	6.oz	2/5 oz 1pt
Monday	6.oz.	2/5 oz	1 1/2 oz	1 pt.	8.oz.	1.7/9 oz	-	4 oz	8.oz	6.oz	2/5 oz 1pt
Tuesday	6.oz.	2/5 oz	1 1/2 oz	1 pt.	8.oz.	1.7/9 oz	5.oz	-	8.oz	6.oz	2/5 oz 1pt
Wednesday	6.oz.	2/5 oz	1 1/2 oz	1 pt.	8.oz.	1.7/9 oz	-	4 oz	8.oz	6.oz	2/5 oz 1pt
Thursday	6.oz.	2/5 oz	1 1/2 oz	1 pt.	8.oz.	1.7/9 oz	5.oz	-	8.oz	6.oz	2/5 oz 1pt
Friday	6.oz.	2/5 oz	1 1/2 oz	1 pt.	8.oz.	1.7/9 oz	-	4 oz	8.oz	6.oz	2/5 oz 1pt
Saturday	6.oz.	2/5 oz	1 1/2 oz	1 pt.	8.oz.	1.7/9 oz	5.oz	-	8.oz	6.oz	2/5 oz 1pt

SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF PRISONERS: CHURCH SERVICES ON SUNDAYS

The following arrangements must henceforth be made on Sundays when chaplains visit to hold religious services.

- (1) Church services will be held in the stone church, near the new prison.
- (2) The first service will start shortly after 10 a.m. The prisoners must be in the church in order for the chaplain to go there directly to hold the service after the landing of the boat.
- (3) The second service will start approximately 2.15 p.m. that is, as soon as possible after members are back from their meals.
- (4) Priority must be given to members of the denomination of the chaplain. The church can accommodate about 160 persons at a time.
 - (a) If there are too many members for the first service, some must attend the second service.
 - (b) If there are not enough members, even for the first service, the number must be augmented by other prisoners anxious to attend the service. The church must in any event be filled to capacity as far as possible.
- (5) After the first service, which will last until approximately 11 a.m. the chaplain can hold further services at the hospital, the isolation and segregation sections. The chaplain will stand between the rows of dormitories at the isolation and segregation sections to deliver his sermon. He will be allowed to walk up and down the corridor, but will confine himself solely to the service and will not do individual work at the penal sections.
- (6) Should the chaplain be desirous to see some of the prisoners individually who were in the church service, he will be allowed to see them at the institution. Make the necessary arrangements for a venue at the institution. Where the chaplain wants to talk to prisoners, it must be members of his own church only.
- (7) Attached is a preliminary of visits by the various chaplains. Other names of chaplains may, however, be added.
- (8) This notice must be brought to the attention of all members who are in command during weekends.

C.A. Wessels
OFFICER COMMANDING.

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IV.

CHAPLAINS' PROPOSED VISITS TO ROBBERN
ISLAND DURING 1964

19th January, 1964	-	A. Hughes (Church of England).
16th February, 1964	-	C. de Wet (Presbyterian Church)
15th March, 1964	-	P. Storey (Methodist Church)
19th April, 1964	-	C. de Wet
3rd May, 1964	-	A. Hughes
21st June, 1964	-	P. Storey
19th July, 1964	-	A. Hughes
2nd August, 1964	-	C. de Wet
20th September, 1964	-	P. Storey
18th October, 1964	-	C. de Wet
15th November, 1964	-	A. Hughes
6th December, 1964	-	P. Storey
13th December, 1964	-	C. de Wet
27th December, 1964	-	A. Hughes

Kleurling Eerwaarde September - Moeswiese Sending.

