

Deaths in prisons: Lawyers, NGO want probe, gov's intervention

By John Chukwu Azu

Lawyers and a criminal justice organization are calling for a fundamental amendment of the Nigerian constitution as it concerns prisons congestion following rising deaths in the facilities.

Constitutional lawyer, Mike Ozekhome (SAN) and human rights lawyer, Femi Falana (SAN) on Friday called for the amendment of the constitution with adoption of federalism in the country's judicial administration, especially as the congestion in prisons involves mainly state offenders remanded

by magistrate courts.

In August 2016, six inmates were killed in the Abakaliki Prison, Ebonyi State in a failed jail break, and on January 27 six inmates also died when a gang came to rescue notorious Ibo criminal, 'Vampire' at Owerri High Court. Also on February 28, two detainees died in police custody in Lagos, leading to protests by sympathizers.

Spokesman of Nigerian Prisons Service (NPS) DCP Francis said during a telephone interview yesterday that nobody died during the Owerri.

The Citizens United for the Rehabilitation of Errants (CURE)

has called on the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to launch full investigation into the recent deaths of inmates across the country and bring those responsible to account, as well as pay compensation to victims' families.

Also, CURE's executive director, Sylvester Uhaa, in a letter to governors of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) implored them to provide logistics, welfare and recreational facilities in prisons within their states.

The NGO stated that of the 69,000 inmates across the

country, more than 46,000 were awaiting trial which makes Nigeria the country with the 5th highest awaiting trial inmates in Africa, trailing behind Libya, Benin Republic, DCR, and Central African Republic.

"Prolonged pre-trial detention is a colossal waste of human potential that comes at a considerable cost to your respective states, taxpayers, families, and communities, as some of those who have been detained unjustly would have engaged in one form of economic activity or the other, contributing to economic growth of your states and that of the nation. But

instead, they are dependent on government," Uhaa said.

Speaking at the Federal High Court in Abuja, Ozekhome decried the situation where in a federal system a magistrate court remands a minor offender and he is taken to a federal prison, leading to further congestion.

Falana called for the establishment of state police in a general review of the criminal justice administration in the country, but cautioned that the police should not be placed under the governors.

"Let a police council made up of different stakeholders administer it," he suggested.

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