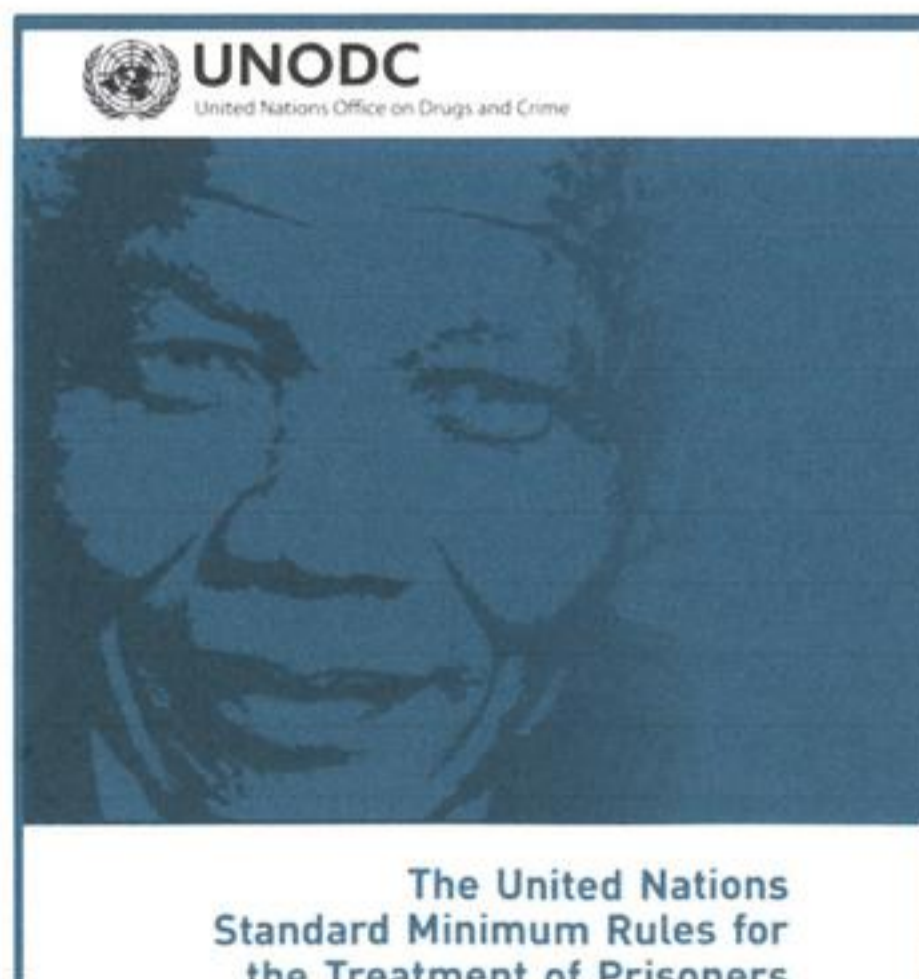


An open letter to the incoming Commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections



We are writing to you at the start of your appointment, and the start of a brand new decade, in the hope that the 2020s will be a better decade for those who will spend it in the care and custody of MDOC.

We congratulate you on your appointment. We know that after the desperate events of the last few weeks, this is a huge challenge. You are inheriting a terrible legacy. But we are looking to you to make a difference.

We believe that the explosion of disorder that took place across Mississippi prisons reflect – amongst other things - the very poor conditions in which prisoners are required to spend their lives. We do not believe that these meet, in almost any dimension, the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners – ‘The Mandela Rules’ – which were adopted unanimously in 2015, as minimum standards to which every country in the UN is signatory. We are asking you to make them your touchstone in your work here. We would particularly ask you to address the following, very basic issues. We believe that this is the only way forward for lasting improvement in prison discipline.

Please make sure that the men and women in your care have access to clean water to drink, and to wash. We have this year seen horrific pictures of filthy water coming from taps in MDOC prisons, for reasons we can only guess. To compound this, the dire physical infrastructure means that many prisoners have little or no access to water for washing. Recently we heard of an inmate of Parchman, pleading with officers to be allowed a shower before a court appearance : he has no access to running water in his cell, and he had not had access to a shower for a month.

Please make sure that the men and women in your care are properly fed. The last published figures showed that just \$2.89 a day is spent on prisoners’ food. Prisoners regularly report that food is of poor quality, often insufficient, sometimes unrecognisable content, sometimes stale or date expired, sometimes delivered on dirty and wet trays.

Please make sure that the men and women in your care have access to sunlight. Staff shortages mean that many prisoners lack regular access to any yard and some are locked up for months at a time, never going outside. Without sunlight, vitamin D production is impaired (do you compensate for this in prisoners’ diets?) Without sunlight, Serotonin and Melatonin production is impaired resulting in a range of negative physical and mental impacts.

Please make sure that the men and women in your care are enabled and encouraged to exercise. Like lack of sunlight, lack of exercise is associated with poor health, depressed mood, and poor life outcomes.

Please make sure that the men and women in your care have access to medical treatment. Chilling stories are in circulation about delays and deficiencies in healthcare during mental and physical illness or after injuries. Long term prisoners tell us that they receive no routine eyecare, dental care or general health monitoring. Morbidity and mortality in prisons are high.

Please make sure that the men and women in your care have opportunities to socialise safely. Rule 44 defines prolonged solitary confinement – specified as 15 or more days of confinement for 22 or more hours a day without meaningful human contact – as a form of torture. Yet in Mississippi many prisoners are subject to such confinement, sometimes for months at a time, not even as punishment, but simply as a result of low staffing levels.

Please make sure that the men and women in your care are able to maintain their ties to family and friends outside. Such contacts are essential for prisoners welfare in prison and for their hopes of eventual reintegration. Yet visitation is regularly denied or cancelled, sometimes because of staffing issues or other factors unrelated to the individual prisoner.

Please make sure that the men and women in your care are supported in growing and reforming and leading decent lives. Your website states that "While incarcerated, offenders are offered treatment, education, and vocational programs that will assist them in becoming a productive member of their community once released." But we are regularly told that for many prisoners there is no rehabilitation on offer in MDOC. No work. No treatment. No education. No library. No training. No guidance. We can find no published figures for expenditure on such matters – if any such expenditure takes place at all, it is included at the very end of a very long list of unrelated "other" items, all of which have to be found from just a few dollars per prisoner per day.

If you have read this far, thank you. All of the above are matters of basic human rights, and covered by the Standard Minimum Rules which apply world-wide, even in the poorest countries. How can we NOT demand these things for the prisoners of Mississippi? And how can you, in your position, refuse them?

But this is a new decade, and even beyond all these, I have one more request of you. (I know, I know. I have made a long list of requests already, and your service is desperately underfunded.) But you have read this far, so I'm going to ask. My other requests all add to the demands on your funding, but this last one could reduce those demands.

Please work to make sure that the men and women in your care have access to parole. Access to parole gives prisoners the hope of a second chance, an incentive to reform. It allows reformed prisoners to leave the prison system and become productive citizens. It avoids the pointless waste of lives that pose no threat. It could reduce the desperate burden of mass incarceration that affects the whole of Mississippi society, in so many ways. It could reduce the overcrowding and inadequate resources which contributed to the recent troubles.

Despite the legal reforms in 2014, many prisoners are still denied access to parole – and not just those to whom the court has awarded sentences 'without parole'. For example, a kid of 18 who is sentenced to life for a violent offence – not Life Without Parole - will have to serve a minimum of 47 years, till they are 65, with no parole, regardless of whether they reform. This is disproportionate, wretched, soul destroying. It adds to the burdens on your service, and on families and on communities. It robs young prisoners of hope. To address this – for young

prisoners in particular but also for all prisoners - just one action is necessary. The State of Mississippi has to repeal MS 47-7-3 (1)e-g. To do so would not mean that dangerous prisoners had to be released. But it would allow the Parole Board to release prisoners who have served enough time, who pose no ongoing risk and who are ready to start a new and decent life. So much benefit could flow from this. Please, Ms Hall, tell your colleagues that it is time for this reform.

Thank you for reading this letter. We hope that you have read it in the spirit in which we have sent it. You are at the start of a huge challenge, and despite the restrictions of budget and resources, you are a profoundly influential figure. We call on you to use that influence to make the 2020s a better decade for Mississippi and its prisoners. **Please make us proud of you.**

Yours sincerely,

Carly Rheilan, and all those undersigned.

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