



Inmates at Kampala remand home reads in a library constructed by Africa Prison Project at Luzira November 25 INDEPENDENT/ JAMES AKENA

Hope in Uganda's prisons

By Ryan Schuette

On a normal day, Alexy Agala goes to the library, finds a book on land law and studies land reform. It helps the inmate with his day in court – his clan charged him on a matter related to his family's land – and passes the time while he waits at Kampala Remand Home.

"I am very lucky," Alexy admits, noting that prisoners from other remand prisons, and particularly from lower and upper prisons, receive few, if any, luxuries like books. Indeed the refurbished library he uses – which contains hundreds of volumes on as varied topics as Miltonian economics and Roman architecture – is as uncommon for a prison in Uganda as the sanitised infirmaries with their orderly beds, clean linens and inspection rooms.

If you think these are the good works of a government suddenly interested in the welfare of prisoners, think again. It's all thanks to the African Prisons Project (APP), a British charity whose sole purpose is to provide prisoners in Africa with access to education, health, justice – and hope. Much as with Kampala Remand Home, APP is supplying books, renovating facilities and making it possible for inmates to live better lives at prisons like Luzira Upper Prison, Jinja Prison, and Gulu Prison, making it a vital voice for one of the most neglected segments of the population.

For APP's founder, Alex McLean, it all started with a gap-year visit to Mulago Hospital in 2004, where he met prisoners from Luzira Upper Prison. "Their condition was quite awful," McLean says. "One prisoner was in a coma and handcuffed to his bed. The others wouldn't take food or water because they couldn't use the restroom."

McLean, now 23, an interested Briton with a heartfelt sympathy for the less fortunate, set out to investigate the upper prison's conditions for himself. Appalled by overcrowded cells and an environment that left it wanting in sanitation, he returned weeks later to help restore the dilapidated infirmary. This time, McLean asked the prisoners what they needed most. The overwhelming response: "Education." Thus began APP, now a well-connected charity established in the world's upper echelon of young philanthropic causes. With headquarters appropriately stationed near the confines of Luzira Upper Prison, it has supplied inmates like Alexy with an untold number of books in the thousands, sickbeds and mattresses, access to lawyers, even a so-called Lifeline program to connect them with loved ones unaware of their circumstances, an essential service in Uganda, where citizens often face imprisonment without these legal and personal guarantees. As a way to involve Ugandans as stakeholders, APP is seeking MTN's sponsorship to further the latter program and cover the costs of making phone calls.

"For many prisoners it's about learning basic education," notes Tom Loan, APP's public relations officer, "but it's also about equipping them with everything else they need to make a change in their lives," such as emotional support from loved ones.

Reflecting the attention it rightfully receives for these services, the charity boasts of funding support from the likes of The Vodafone Foundation, recognition with several awards McLean received for his work – including the United Kingdom's Young Philanthropist of the Year award – and acknowledgement from royals like Queen Elizabeth II.

All the well-deserved kudos in the world

doesn't make providing these services any easier a task for the organisation, though, whose paid staff and volunteers sometimes find themselves at odds with prison bureaucrats unsure of their intentions and wary of foreign intrusion. A certain combination of patience, diligence, and trust is needed for the organisation to secure the permission letters a charity of its nature needs to gain admission to a given prison, even with vital assistance from the British High Commission in Uganda. At a less observed level, widespread deficiencies in the prison system – both legal and structural – underpin some of the larger obstacles that ensure APP's gains on behalf of prisoners evolve at a step-by-step process. For example, many of the facilities Uganda employs to house inmates – including the ones at Luzira Upper Prison – date back to the era of British colonisation, and were built to house much less than a fourth of the current prison population.

"Many prisoners spend anywhere from three to five years on remand, constituting 60 percent of the entire prison population and encouraging the current problem," says Livingstone Sewanyana, director of the Foundation for Human Rights Initiative. "The conditions [at these prisons] are horrible, and they don't have the infrastructure" to maintain the high populations.

Still, for the challenges the organisation faces, there are prisoners like Alexy, who dutifully spends his time reading the books APP provides and preparing for a life after prison. "I hope to get out and make my situation better," he says. "I could not do it without these books."

To contact Alex McLean and the Africa Prisons Project, go to www.africanprisons.org