UN bodies call for drug centre closure

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Thirteen UN entities on Monday issued a joint statement calling on countries in Asia and the Pacific to close all compulsory drug detention and rehabilitation centres to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and other diseases and some forms of human rights violations.

The group includes the International Labour Organisation (ILO), UN Development Programme and UN Office on Drug and Crime, among others.

“UN entities urgently appeal to member states to permanently close compulsory drug detention and rehabilitation centres and implement voluntary, evidence-informed and rights-based health and social services in the community as an important measure to curb the spread of Covid-19 and to facilitate the recovery and reintegration of those in the centres back into their families and communities,” the statement said.

It said people detained in such centres are among vulnerable groups most at risk of contracting the virus. They are mostly drugs addicts, sex workers or young victims of sexual exploitation.

While the criteria for detention at these centres vary from one country to another, it said people are often detained without due process, legal safeguards or judicial review under the label of “treatment” or “rehabilitation”.

The group says the closure is to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and other diseases and some forms of human rights violations. Post staff
It said detainees are more vulnerable to diseases including HIV, tuberculosis and Covid-19 due to poor living conditions resulting from overcrowding and subsequent difficulties in maintaining physical distancing.

Also contributing to the issue are forced labour, inadequate nutrition, physical and sexual violence and a lack of access to quality healthcare services.

“During this global health emergency, UN entities reiterate their call on member states that operate compulsory drug detention and rehabilitation centres to close them permanently without further delay, to release individuals detained as an important additional measure to curb the spread of Covid-19 and to refrain from the use of any other form of detention,” the statement said.

The group said they are ready to work with countries in the region to transform those facilities into community-based drug treatment centres.

Cambodia’s National Authority for Combating Drugs (NACD) told The Post on Monday there are currently 17 drug rehabilitation centres across the Kingdom, 10 of which are managed by the state, three by private institutions, and four by non-governmental organisations.

There are also 451 community-based drug treatment centres.

NACD secretary-general Meas Vyrith said the drug rehabilitation centres only receive drug addicts on a voluntary basis and on parents’ requests.

He said drug traffickers are not only trying all means to lure people into using drugs but are also active in producing and trafficking them. Their aim, he said, is to expand the drug market which in turn causes health, social and security problems.

“We put ourselves in the parents’ shoes when deciding on what to do to drug users. Imagine if drug users or victims happen to be our family members or relatives,” he said.

Ministry of Justice spokesperson Chin Malin said the closure of such centres is not warranted. He is of the view that drug users who are not seriously addicted can be treated at community-based centres, while those in serious conditions must receive treatment at a rehabilitation centre.

“I don’t agree with the idea of closing drug rehabilitation centres. Instead, there should be an improvement in services at the centres including hygiene, health and rehabilitation, along with respect for human rights by preventing torture and violence.

“This is better than closing the centres and turning them into community-based treatment ones,” he said.
Cambodian Centre for Human Rights (CCHR) executive director Chak Sopheap said states must balance the risks caused by releasing detainees against the risks facing detainees in detention, especially amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

“States can mitigate risks associated with releasing individuals from detention who are still drug-dependent and not fully rehabilitated by ensuring appropriate health care services are available to them at the community level and on a voluntary basis.

“These services should include medical treatment in addition to legal and social services to ensure a holistic health care model,” she said.