Thailand separates LGBT inmates, considers segregated prison

By Dake Kang
The Associated Press

SAFETY OR SEGREGATION? *Transgender inmates play volleyball at Pattaya Remand prison in Pattaya, Thailand. The prison separates lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender prisoners from other inmates, a little-known policy despite being in place nationwide since 1993, according to the Department of Corrections. (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit)*

PATTAYA, Thailand — Theerayut Charoenpakdee was terrified when police stopped her outside a mall in Pattaya, a Thai resort famous for its sordid nightlife. A urine test on the spot revealed meth coursing through her veins.

"I thought I was going to be thrown in prison with all the men because I still have the title of Mr.," the transgender woman said. "I was afraid. News and TV tells us that being sent to prison is scary."

It turned out not to be the ordeal she expected. The prison she was destined for — Pattaya Remand — separates lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) prisoners from other inmates, a little-known policy despite being in place nationwide since 1993, according to the Department of Corrections. Thailand, often described as a haven for gay people, has around 300,000 prisoners, of which more than 6,000 are registered as sexual minorities.

And that's not all. The Thai government is also considering what could be the world's first prison facility exclusively for LGBT inmates. While the plans are still being discussed, in Pattaya and other prisons across Thailand, LGBT prisoners are kept apart to prevent violence, officials say.

"If we didn't separate them, people could start fighting over partners to sleep with," said Pattaya Remand warden Watcharavit Vachiralerphum. "It could lead to rape, sexual assault, and the spread of disease."

By day, Pattaya LGBT inmates eat together and do their morning exercises in uniform. At night, they sleep in their own quarters, apart from the other inmates.

But most of the time, they mingle freely with the others, though they tend to stick together for daytime activities like sewing or football. Transgender women spike volleyballs next to men pressing barbells and sparing with punching bags; gay men train together in first aid at the jail clinic, sanitizing and bandaging the wounds of straight men.

Many LGBT inmates agree the limited separation is a decent compromise between safety and segregation.

"There are people that discriminate against gays," said Chawalit Chankiew, one of the gay clinic workers, sentenced to nine years for document forgery. "If I happen to sleep next to someone who hates gay people, I wouldn't know it unless they show it. What if they hurt me one day?"

Theerayut says the prison's segregation makes her one-and-a-half year sentence more bearable. "If we behave like others, if we aren't stubborn and don't break rules, this place actually isn't so vicious," she said, sitting in a prison yard fenced with barbed wire, her long hair bobbing up and down as she spoke.

But the system isn't without problems.

"Transgender women who have not gone through gender reassignment surgery, they have to shave their head and live with the men, and there's going to be problems," says Wannapong Yodmuang, an LGBT advocate with the Rainbow Sky Association. "Some of them are going to be OK living with the men, but there are some transgender women who might have a bad experience with men and won't want to live with them."

There are also concerns that the system does not adequately tend to the specialized health needs of transgender inmates. Hormone therapy, for example, is written off as a luxury by some. But LGBT advocates say it is essential.

Plans for a separate facility for LGBT inmates on the outskirts of Bangkok could improve their treatment inside prison. The idea was first proposed as a measure to keep LGBT people safe, but it stalled over concern it would keep inmates far from their families.

"It'd be easier to control, easier to take care of, easier to develop and improve their habits and behavior," said Watcharavit. "But they have to mix with other inmates because once they're released, they'll have to rejoin a diverse society."

Some activists worry it could stigmatize them.

"Building and reallocating an entire prison facility for LGBT prisoners is, as a matter of fact, a measure of segregation," said Jean-Sebastian Blanc, an expert on prisons at the Switzerland-based Association for the Prevention of Torture. "There is a significant difference between a public-health policy aiming at preventing transmissible diseases and segregating a segment of the population on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity."

Similar proposals in Italy and Turkey were bogged down under heavy criticism. Italy announced it was rededicating a women's prison for transgender individuals in 2010, but the move was blocked by the Ministry of Justice over concerns that a special jail was a form of discrimination. Activists are attacking a proposed "pink prison" in Turkey over concerns that inmates there could face worse conditions than regular inmates because of anti-gay stigma.

But existing options leave much to be desired. In many prisons in the U.S. and other countries, transgender women face a stark choice: get thrown into cells with men or go into solitary confinement.

Chelsea Manning, the whistleblower arrested for sending secret military files to WikiLeaks, was sentenced in 2013 to 35 years at a male prison in Kansas despite declaring herself a transgender woman. She was thrown into solitary confinement for attempting suicide last year, and was granted clemency by former President Barack Obama.

New Indonesia tsunami network could add crucial minutes

By Stephen Wright
The Associated Press

CRUCIAL EXTRA MINUTES. *A buoy that is part of a tsunami warning system developed by GITEWS (German Indonesian Tsunami Early Warning System) floats in the sea as German* R.V. Sonne *is seen in the background during an installation simulation on Sunda straits off Java island, Indonesia, in this November 15, 2005 file photo. Indonesia's tsunami detection system, made up of seafloor sensors that communicate with transmitting buoys on the surface, has been rendered useless by vandals and lack of funding. Now Indonesian and U.S. scientists say they've developed a way to dispense with the expensive buoys and possibly add crucial extra minutes of warning for vulnerable coastal cities. (AP Photo/Fadlan Arman Syam, File)*

JAKARTA, Indonesia — Indonesia's tsunami detection system, made up of seafloor sensors that communicate with transmitting buoys on the surface, has been rendered useless by vandals and lack of funding. Now Indonesian and U.S. scientists say they've developed a way to dispense with the expensive buoys and possibly add crucial extra minutes of warning for vulnerable coastal cities.

The prototype, nearly four years in the making, is designed to detect so-called near-field tsunamis and has been tested off Padang on the western coast of Sumatra. It awaits a decision on government funding to connect it to disaster agencies on land.

A tsunami triggered by a December 26, 2004 earthquake in the Indian Ocean that killed or left missing nearly 230,000 people, a large share of them in Indonesia, raised the urgency of ensuring communities have the fastest possible warnings.

But when a sizeable earthquake struck near the Mentawai islands 106 miles from Padang in March last year, none of the buoys in the area meant to transmit tsunami warnings were working. A disaster official said all of Indonesia's 22 buoys, which cost several hundred thousand dollars each and are expensive to operate, were inoperable because of vandalism by boat crews or a lack of funds for maintenance.

That quake didn't cause a tsunami, but there was a chaotic evacuation in Padang, population 1 million, and other cities, which have at most 30 minutes before tsunami waves hit. Because of lack of information, officials didn't cancel the tsunami warning for two hours.

"Now we have no buoys in Indonesia. They are all damaged," said Iyan Turyana, an ocean engineer at BPPT, Indonesia's Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology. "Where do you live in Indonesia? Jakarta! It's ok. But if you live in Padang, if you live in Bengkulu, your life is [in danger]."

Germany and the U.S. provided 12 of the buoys, but did not maintain them, he said.

For Indonesians, Aceh province in the north of Sumatra where more than 100,000 people died after the 2004 earthquake, is synonymous with tsunami risk. Now, however, Padang and nearby cities face the greatest danger of being wiped out by giant waves.

The magnitude 9.1 quake in 2004, centered in the north of a subduction zone where one major section of the earth's crust is being forced under another, released enough energy to make a similarly powerful quake in that area unlikely in the foreseeable future. In the section of that "megathrust" off Padang, pressure has built relentlessly and an undersea earthquake greater than magnitude 8.5 is possible in the next few decades.

To boost its detection ability, tsunami-prone Japan has linked dozens of seafloor sensors off its eastern coast with thousands of kilometers of fiber-optic cable. That cost several hundred million dollars and a similar endeavor would be impossibly expensive for Indonesia, a vast but poor archipelago in one of the most seismically active regions in the world.

But with $3 million of funding from the U.S. National Science Foundation, a prototype network of undersea sensors has been deployed between Padang and the Mentawai islands.

Buoys are not needed because the undersea seismometers and pressure sensors send data-laden sound waves to the warm surface waters. From there they refract back into the depths, travelling 20 to 30 kilometers to the next node in the network and so on.

At its final undersea point, the network needs a few kilometers of fiber optic cable to connect it to a shore station in the Mentawai islands where the cascades of data would be transmitted by satellite to the meteorology and geophysics agency, which issues tsunami warnings, and to disaster officials in Padang.

"This entire process likely takes one to three minutes instead of the five to 45 minutes typical of the buoy system," said Louise Comfort, a University of Pittsburgh expert in disaster management who has led the project, which also involves engineers from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute.

"We get a more immediate record of the seismic movement and with that more immediate record we gain a few minutes of very valuable time," she said. "And we get a clearer signal of whether or not there is going to be a tsunami."

Laying the cable will cost the Indonesian government about 1.5 billion rupiah ($112,000), said Turyana, the ocean engineer. The Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education is considering a funding proposal.

The system has not been deployed elsewhere, but could be an option for other poor countries or regions that are vulnerable to tsunamis.

Since 2004, the mantra among disaster officials in Indonesia has been that the earthquake is the tsunami warning and signal for immediate evacuation. Not

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