

# Lebanon's prison conditions, in black-and-white

BEIRUT: Letitia Gallery's short-term exhibition "Lebanese Prisons" takes a closer look at the poor conditions of detention centers around the country, through the lens of photojournalist Haitham Moussawi. Shown within the framework of the first Beirut Image Festival, Moussawi's 20-odd black-and-white snaps are a fraction of the thousands he has taken over the last three years.

"I've been to 23 prisons over Lebanon," Moussawi told The Daily Star. "Everyone has heard of Roumieh but there are many. This project is so people can be aware of what happens inside these places and how the inmates live.

"Everyone has a story and their reasons why they believe they don't deserve to be there," he added. "The one common factor is that all the prisons have poor sanitation, are overcrowded and [there is] little regard to basic human rights."

Moussawi has been the head of the photography department at Al-Akhbar newspaper since it was established and has also been a freelance photographer for Agence France Presse since 1996.

According to Omar Nashabe, a criminal justice analyst and adviser on human rights to the Lebanese government, prison conditions in Lebanon do not match international standards. Nashabe worked with Moussawi on the project, to provide information on the issue.

"Lebanon's two central prisons in Roumieh and Zahle are the only structures designed to be official jails," Nashabe said in the exhibition's statement. "Most of the prisons are located in basements of military barracks and centers of the security forces or in old serails dating back to the Ottoman era."

“Officially and according to international standards, prisons should accommodate 1,500 inmates but penitentiaries are currently overcrowded and the number exceeds 6,000,” he added. “Because of the overcrowded prisons sewerage is considered to be the most prominent problem. Prisons also suffer from acute shortage of fresh drinking water, or water used for bathing and washing clothes.”

Inadequate medical services, a lack of sleeping, eating and leisure areas, and poor food quality, are also concerns raised in the photos.

The snaps show candid moments of the inmates, some in cramped sleeping quarters, and others trying to scoop food out of a communal vat of food. Some are more symbolic, such as a man holding a caged songbird up to the camera.

“The birdcage should not be allowed, technically,” Moussawi said of the untitled work. “The caged bird mimics the caged man but it also shows the relationship between the man and his bird, which he passes the time caring for.

“With time, people will come to see what it’s like inside and more awareness will be made.”

“Lebanese Prisons” is showing at Letitia Gallery, Hamra, until Sept. 14.



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