

Submitted by the sister of a young South African woman detained in Mauritius

I am writing this on behalf of my sister ( name withheld ), currently serving a 10 year sentence in Beau Bassin Women's Prison in Mauritius .

She was arrested on the 10th March 2003 for drug smuggling. This was the beginning of a long and difficult, emotionally exhausting journey for her and our family. I cannot tell you the emotional pain and shock our whole family felt when we first heard the news. Or how many times we replayed that time period in our minds wondering what we could have maybe done to prevent this from happening.

She was then held in remand prison for over 3 years awaiting trial before she was sentenced. To wait 3 years not knowing what will become of your life was extremely difficult for her and our family.

Having a loved one detained abroad, or being a detainee is pure agony, there is no support system for her, no friends and no family. I have not seen, touched or hugged my sister in 6 years. She has also been denied visits from Mauritian citizens. Because she is a foreigner they will not even allow a stranger to visit her, to ease her distress.

Foreigners are dominated and she has been verbally and physically abused by local inmates, she constantly lives in fear and NOTHING gets done. The guards also abuse and beat inmates and in a recent case one of the inmates was fatally assaulted. Dead! Life over!

Will the South African Government wait until one of our citizens are murdered abroad?

We never know exactly what is really happening to her behind prison walls as calls are monitored, if she tries to tell us that something is wrong and it does not reflect well on the prison, the call is cut. If it's written in a letter, it will not be sent.

This is also very financially crippling, despite the lawyers fees, money has to be sent to her every month. With our absent father and deceased mother, the financial responsibility of keeping her alive with the basic necessities has been bestowed upon our uncle, without him she would have no financial support whatsoever. Without his support she would not be able to survive.

The living conditions of this prison are inhumane, the cells have no running water, the place where you wash your clothes, face and brush your teeth is the SAME place you're expected to wash out your night "potty" These basins (if you can call them that) are old and full of mould with peeling paint from pure dilapidation. The toilets are filthy porcelain holes in the ground, and you are lucky if you have toilet paper to use afterwards.

The food is terrible, lacking basic nutrients to sustain a healthy body.

They have poor medical treatment, plus if there is a shortage of guard's on the day of your appointment with the medical person it will be cancelled, no matter what your medical condition is. My sister has been denied medical treatment on more than one occasion and nothing gets done. On one of those occasions she had been locked in solitary confinement, which means she was totally alone, if anything had happened to her during that time, who would have been there to notice?

**The prison is riddled with bed lice which bite at you constantly, rats and cockroaches literally crawl over you day and night. It is beyond filthy. It is inhumane to make anyone live like that.** □

**It is unacceptable that the South African government will allow this to happen to their citizens!!** It is a basic human right to be able to be clean. The Government have complete knowledge of everything that has been happening and they have the complete power to do something about it but they do NOTHING!

Why is it that Mauritius has signed Prisoner Transfer Agreements with other SADC Member States and Commonwealth countries and are more than willing to enter into a prisoner transfer agreement with South Africa , but our Government does not want to do so?? They will rather allow our citizens to rot in foreign prisons with no family, away from all they know.

One may argue that this is the price you pay for the crime you have committed, but is this what you think someone barely out of her teens deserves for being a victim of manipulative drug lords who preyed on her vulnerability. Having no parents for support or guidance?

My sister is paying with her youth, is this not enough?

It is time someone stands up and does something.

**IT IS TIME FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT TO SIGN PRISONER TRANSFER AGREEMENTS WITH OTHER COUNTRIES AND BRING OUR PEOPLE HOME!!!**

Submitted by Pat Gerber, mother of Johann Gerber, currently serving 11 years in Mauritius.

Pat has been extremely active with trying to find a way to get the SA Govt to initiate the long-overdue Prisoner Transfer Agreement. Pat writes,

The trauma we went through will never be wiped from my mind.

On Wednesday 31 August 2005 at 3.15pm I received the call from Foreign Affairs. My 19 year

old son Johann, had been arrested in Mauritius.

I was devastated and only slept about 2 hours a night, many nights never sleeping at all, I could not eat because all I could think of was 'has my son got something to eat'. On Friday 2 September 2005 when speaking to a staff member at the South African Embassy in Mauritius I was told quote; "Your son has been framed, there is nothing you can do, so don't even think of getting on a plane, because this country has its own laws". They ended saying they would let me know when I should come. I felt even more helpless after hearing this. So for the next 2 months we searched the media in Mauritius only to discover that there were over 20 other South Africans detained. I was horrified at what was happening and became more anxious at the Human Rights Violations taking place in the prisons. Beau Bassin Mens Prison had no public telephones for the detainees to call their families. Public phones were only installed October 2007. After waiting all this time I decided on 31 October 2005 to fly to Mauritius. I did not know a soul, nor had I been to a foreign country on my own before. I did not know the foreign currency, speak their language or know where the prison was.

When I saw Johann on our first visit I sobbed and I cannot express in words how much pain I carried in my heart. He had lost a lot of weight and I could see he was traumatized. The longing just to hold and touch him or even see and speak to him regularly is unbearable. The only items we are allowed to give to Johann when we visit him are books and items of clothing. No sweets, no food, not even vitamins.

**"As the days draw closer for my last visit with Johann, I notice that he becomes quiet and I can see the distress on his face. This is traumatic for me as I feel helpless to change the situation. To say goodbye is the worst day of my life and this never changes even though it is the 5th time I have travelled to visit Johann. I always ask for a window seat when flying to and from Mauritius because I cry all the way home. I am torn in two and a part of me is left behind in Mauritius."**

Not a day goes past that I do not think, is he safe, (the South Africans have been attacked by the Mauritian inmates) and I long for my son to be nearer to home.

I will never understand the logic behind the reason why, when Mauritius has signed Prisoner Transfer Agreements with other SADC Member States and Commonwealth Countries and are more than willing to enter into a Prisoner Transfer Agreement with South Africa, our Government does not want to do so even for HUMANITARIAN reasons. I wish no one to bear this pain. I am physically and emotionally drained when I arrive home from a visit to Mauritius.

Patricia Gerber

Submitted by Belinda West, friend of a South African woman, arrested in South America in the middle of August 2008.

The phone rings and when you answer your friends mom says, "Have you heard from her? She was supposed to land at OR Tambo Airport at 9.30 last night. I haven't heard from her and thought she might have decided to stay with you in Joburg for a night before heading back to Durban."

"No, I haven't heard from her in about three weeks. Where did she go?"

"Venezuela"

Venezuela? What for?"

After getting some information from her mom, my immediate thoughts were 'what on earth was in Venezuela, what kind of Marketing job was she doing there and why had her return flight itinerary been changed.' I thought 'she has gone missing in a part of the world where human trafficking was common' and panic set in. Then came the filing of a missing persons report and begging the airline to check their passenger list to establish what, if any, of the flights she was on. Ethically, airlines do not divulge this information but under the circumstances they kindly did. It soon became apparent that she had not left Venezuela.

The days that followed that phonecall, the phonecall that will forever be embedded in my mind, catapulted us into unknown territory and as we were being hurled through a surrealistic space and time, aside from the utmost urgency to gain knowledge of exactly what was happening, where on the planet was she really and was she alive, it was all just a blur of frantic chaos.

Every time you think of the situation, which is pretty much every minute of every day, a weird feeling takes place in the deepest part of your soul. Imagine a person thrusting their fist through your chest, grabbing hold of your spine and shaking you... vigorously! That's about the best way I can describe it and while new information trickles in every day and you tread the rough waters, there is no mistaking that sound. The sound that is not heard, but felt deep inside. The sound that rattles you to the very core of your existence... it's a sound of clashing steel, a prison door, shutting you out, the hard cold steel door that now separates and severs. And the more you read about where she is and what conditions she is facing, the more your jaw drops. This is not human existence as we know it. This is not how human beings treat each other in 2008! These conditions in prisons don't exist anymore... but they do! This is a person you have shared time with, laughed with, cried with. You have partied together, seen relationships come and go, your children grew up together, you've holiday'd together, you've rescued each other in hard times, you know each other better than you know most of your own family... and now, that same person who is so much a part of you has been thrown into one of harshest prisons in the WORLD, but worse than that ... she's on another CONTINENT!

And so, you find yourself in the middle of a nightmare beyond your wildest imagination. A nightmare that has you on the outside, looking in... and you are helpless. Utterly helpless because there is nothing you can do. As you hit the ground running, you scream for help, you call your own authorities, the Consular Office, the people who are supposed to help and you hit one brick wall after another, relentlessly. It's an extremely harsh reality that hits you like a freight train, hard and ruthless, uncaring and completely unforgiving!

As human beings we grow from childhood and we learn about emotional aspects of life; birth, death, happiness, sorrow, love, hate... we come to understand these emotions. When a loved one is arrested and imprisoned, particularly under these conditions we're faced with a whole new set of emotions, completely unfamiliar to us. It's not a death but it's like a death and you have no choice but to deal with the crisis at hand, there is no time to waste but you're working from a place that is unknown, unfamiliar and very unstable. You will never have 'flown by the seat of your pants' quite like you do in this situation.

When you step into a hot bath you cry because she is bathing out of a bucket of cold, dirty water. When you get into bed at night you cry because she is sleeping on a cockroach infested concrete floor, on a piece of cardboard because there are no beds. When you eat a meal you cry because you know that she is scrambling on the same filthy floor for scraps of food thrown down by the prison guards. The SA Embassy says "send us money and we'll get it to her" and you do but they don't... and when you ask WHY they say "she's too far from our office and we can only see her once a year" The situation is critical. The situation is life and death.

And why have I gone to such great lengths? Why has my life come to a grinding halt while I scurry back and forth to find information, help and justice? Because she is a human being... and because she is my friend.

We will continue to fight for the return of our citizens by pressurising the South African Government to form the necessary Prisoner Transfer Agreements with all countries and I hope that our heartwrenching stories bring knowledge to as many people as possible. I created the Locked Up website to be a place of current information, based on my own experiences as well as those of other families. This is where you will find the truth. Please, let's stop this muling nonsense! If you really must use drugs leave the transportation of it up to the big boys. You truly have NO idea what kind of people you're dealing with!

Belinda West