

Dragan LEKIC
Photographe - France
Portable : +33 (0)6 11 82 08 38
d.lekic@free.fr

Abovian Prison

Abovian, Armenia - twenty minutes outside of Yerevan is Abovian Prison, the buildings are quite dilapidated, with some pro-Soviet remnants lying around. The inmates are incarcerated in the state-run prison, founded in 1958, the buildings are naturally in a state of disrepair after the collapse of the former Soviet regime, but with the support of the state, the premises are being refurbished. Originally a prison for minors, it has been housing women prisoners since 1991. The prisoners are supervised by guards, social workers, psychologists, lawyers and doctors. Where there are llamas, goats, donkeys, and tropical fish in aquariums, the prisoners are always accompanied by guards in all their movements and thus remain under their control. Juvenile detainees are mostly incarcerated for theft, rape and assault. There are now 22 minor children in prison.

The detainees do not have individual cells, but all sleep in a large dormitory. The youngest detainee among the minors is 16 years old and the oldest is 19 years old.

Workshops:

Sewing, painting, ceramics, singing, dancing, visits to the zoo and the aquarium located in the prison.

Work on the roof of the women's building and later also the juvenile building.

The meals are prepared by the women prisoners.

There are also animals such as cows and sheep, and the football field is used as pasture.

Visits from relatives and friends are not very strict: it all depends on the behaviour of the prisoners. There is also correspondence, the telephone is available to prisoners who wish to contact their families.

The 1st of June 2006 "child protection day" is a day of celebration, it is exceptional for the prisoners, it is the only day of the year when families are allowed to enter the prison and stay with the prisoners for a whole afternoon where of course they share a meal that the families bring with them.

One of the most obvious manifestations of these improvements in the last four years has been the significant reduction in the number of juvenile prisoners. From 1980-1985, he gives as an example, there were over 300 children incarcerated.

"During the Soviet years, some aspects of the colony were better," he says, particularly regarding the education of children in conflict with the law. In 1990, however, conditions began to worsen, although they are now slowly starting to improve.

The average age is 16, and the maximum sentence is 5 years, after which they are transported to an adult prison. But these cases are very rare. "The training was very important and effective" for the future of these teenagers, says Mr Martirosian, assistant to the prison director. The prison also has a zoo and a botanical garden, which are maintained by the minors. There is also a school with specialised technical classes, a gym (volleyball and basketball).