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# A first look at Death Row 27 Jan 74

By ERIC TOWNER

Death Row was hushed except for the murmuring of the man in Cell One.

His whispered conversation with a prison interpreter was the simple request of a family man: he wanted to see his children.

The man in Cell One has spent months on a mental tightrope in Stanley Prison — like 13 others in the condemned block.

Yesterday, reporters were given their first-ever glimpse of Stanley's Death Row in a special press tour of the prison — and were given an insight into how prison authorities are trying to ease the strain of living in the shadow of the death sentence.

No executions have been carried out in Hongkong since Wong Kai-kei went to the gallows in 1966 for chopping a store watchman to death.

As the debate on capital punishment swings back and forth between the abolitionists in the British Parliament and the pro-hanging populace of Hongkong, the pressure stays on the condemned men.

It reached a peak last year with the

public furore over convicted killer Tsoi Kwok-cheong and his controversial last-minute Royal reprieve.

Yesterday the Prison Superintendent, Mr Richard Mackie, said: "These men are all under pressure. They don't know what the future holds for them — we are trying to make life as bearable as possible."

Security is tight in Death Row. A new steel-barred entrance area has been built outside the main door of the prison block. Inside, sturdy cell doors have been painted bright green to brighten up the sombre grey of the corridors.

On the walk down Death Row, blank faces stare out through the door grills.

One man is shadow-boxing in a corner of his cell.

The 14 prisoners are all at various stages of appealing against the death sentence.

As the lawyers argue their cases they pass the long days reading books and newspapers and watching television.

Unlimited TV is one of the special privileges granted the condemned men.

Lights out should be 8.30, but if there's a special late night programme the prisoners want to watch the small screen is left on till 11.

The television sets — three to a corridor — are hung high, on the walls of the cell block passages and prisoners watch through the bars of their doors.

The men in Death Row are also excused prison work — their day starts at 7 am. They bathe, tidy up their cells and then take breakfast. Each day the condemned men get a one-hour exercise period, usually two prisoners at a time under escort.

They can request a visit from the village Catholic priest any time and are allowed unrestricted visits from families.

Yesterday the man in Cell One spent several minutes talking to the prison interpreter. He wanted the official to phone his family and arrange for a visit from his children in the afternoon.

"He's always concerned about his family," said Mr Mackie. "We do what we can."

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