



SIBERIA: TUBERCULOSIS ON THE RUN

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Russia has a prison population of one million. Some 110 000 of them have tuberculosis and a third of them suffer from a multi-resistant strain that is practically impossible to cure... and it is very contagious. Another chilling statistics to add to the Russian humanitarian disaster? It doesn't stop in Russia... The WHO estimates that this particular strain evident in Russia will reach Western Europe in two years. Our reporters have traced the killer bacillus to its source, to the convict colonies in Siberia, in a place known as the "gulag archipelago". The inmates live in deplorable conditions, they suffer from lack of hygiene and food, live in overcrowded cells with hardly any light. These prisons are the ideal breeding ground for tuberculosis. In the 1990's, a number of Russian doctors rang the alarm bell, alerting the international community and the prison administration to the problem. A programme has been set up to treat the illness in the prisons and it has been relatively successful. But nobody had been able to continue the treatment once released from prison, for lack of money. Therefore, once released, the prisoners are forced to stop any treatment and the illness returns, worse than before, as the bacillus is now more resistant, i.e. "multi-resistant". Treatment for this particular strain is rare and extremely expensive, out of reach for most. The ex-prisoners thus contaminate friends and family... and the bacillus is ready to travel further, to the big Russian cities and Western Europe.

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