

**PUNJAB TO RELEASE 6000 PRISONERS TO DECONGEST JAILS AMID COVID-19 CRISIS:
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CHANDIGARH, MARCH 26:

With a view to decongesting state prisons in wake of COVID-19 pandemic, Punjab is going to release around 6000 prisoners from all the jails across the state.

Disclosing this here today, Punjab Jails Minister S. Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa said that the Supreme Court of India had constituted a High Powered Committee under the chairmanship of Chairperson, Punjab Legal Services Authority, with Principal Secretary (Jails) and ADGP, Prisons as members. The committee has circulated detailed criteria and procedure to initiate the releasing of prisoners. Convict prisoners will be released on parole for 6 weeks and under-trial prisoners on interim-bail for 6 weeks, said Randhawa.

The Minister informed that there were around 24,000 prisoners lodged in 24 jails across the state against an authorized capacity of 23,488. As per committee report, while the primary aim was to protect the health of the prisoners and restrict transmission of COVID-19 by decongestion of prisons. The overall good of the society and maintenance of order in the society in these extraordinary times, was also kept in mind while making the recommendations.

The committee hence, recommended release of convicts on parole for a period of six weeks. Prisoners sentenced upto 7 years with maximum 2 under-trial cases (both on bail); and further should have availed last parole peacefully, are to be considered for release on parole. The Minister further pointed out that the prisoners already out on parole shall be given 6 week extension in parole in order to ensure quarantining of prisons. As a one-time measure, the Superintendents of concerned jails have been empowered to process the cases of parole so as to expedite the process of release. An under-trial shall be considered for a 6 week interim bail, if he/she is facing one or two cases, in which maximum punishment is seven years or less. Special cases under certain heads of crime such as Section 498-A, 420, 406, 324, 325, 379 IPC, Excise act and those under section 107/151 CrPC shall also be considered for the bail. Camp courts shall be held on jail premises itself for grant of interim bail.

However, those convicted or charged under POCSO Act, 376 IPC, 379-B IPC, acid attack, UAPA, Explosives act & foreign nationals shall not be considered for release. Also, conditions have been put on for those covered under NDPS Act cases.

The committee has relaxed the conditions further for release of prisoners suffering from chronic diseases like diabetes, HIV, pregnant women and those above 65 years of age.

To ensure order in the prisons, the DLSA Chairperson has been asked to visit the jail on every alternate day to interact with the prisoners after taking necessary precautions.

The Department of Prisons & Correctional Services is also granting remission as per Punjab Jail

Manual to eligible prisoners.

As per the directions of the apex court, physical presence of under-trial prisoners before the courts has been stopped and recourse to videoconferencing has been taken. The transfer of prisoners from one prison to another is also done only to decongest the jails & ensure social distancing. The facility of 'video mulaqaat' using whatsapp video call will be allowed to the prisoners in the presence of a responsible jail official so that family ties are maintained as physical mulaqaats have been stopped.
