

# Mazaruni Prison



Image: Mazaruni Prison, 2019  
Obrey James

## Historical Overview

# Established

## Mazaruni Penal Settlement

1.

Her Majesty's Penal Settlement (HMPS) Mazaruni was established in 1842. The settlement closed in 1930 due to financial constraints, before reopening in 1939. In 1950 it was renamed Mazaruni Prison.

2.

Mazaruni penal settlement was for the incarceration of convicted male offenders with sentences exceeding 2 months (this was later increased to 12 months).

3.

By the end of 1842 the prison could accommodate 71 prisoners. 34 wards were constructed for prison officers, along with quarters for the superintendent and an additional structure for stores, servants' quarters and a kitchen.

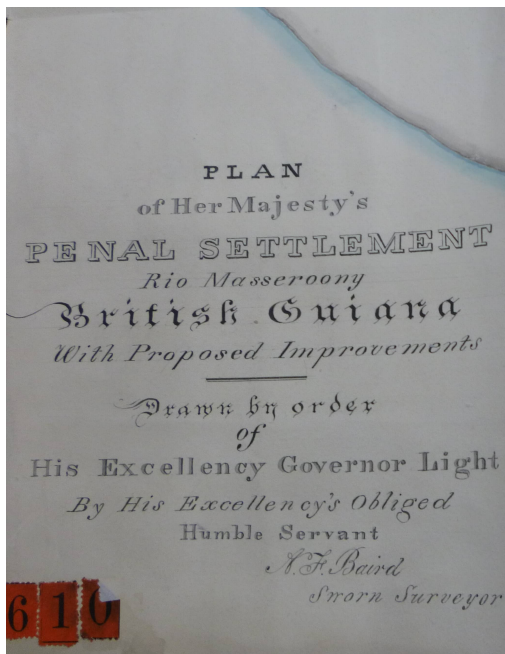


Image: Plan of HMPS Mazaruni, 1842  
TNA, CO 111/209

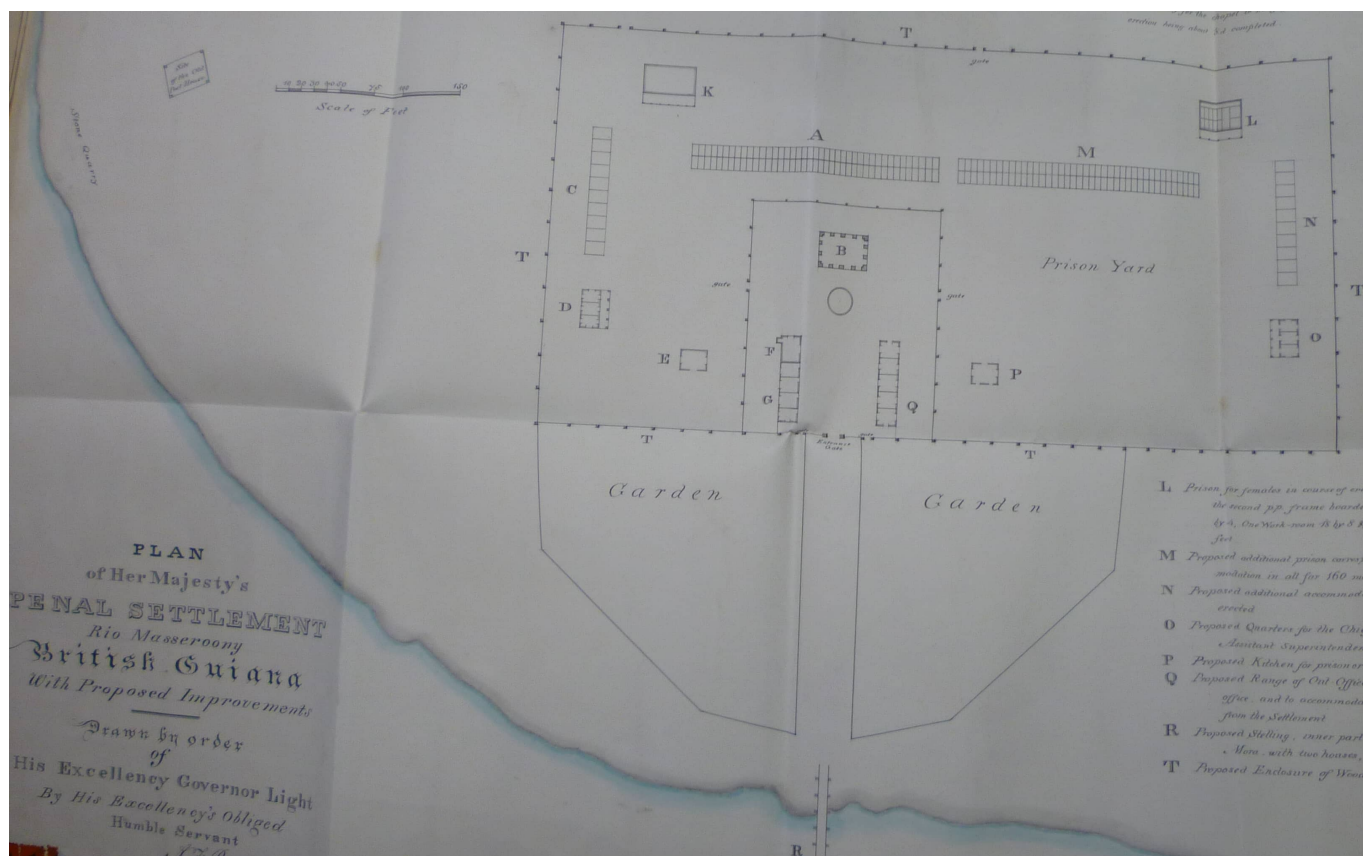


Image: Plan of HMPS Mazaruni, 1842  
TNA, CO 111/209

# Changes to the Prison System

The use of imprisonment in British Guiana was limited until the abolition of slavery in 1833. During this decade the prison population increased from an annual incarceration rate of 0.1% of the total population in 1831 to 1.9% in 1840.

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*Statistics: TNA, CO 116/176-209*

Three district prisons were established to meet the state's increased use of prison sentences after emancipation. These were located in Wakenaam (1837), Mahaica (1837) and Capoey (1838).



The establishment of a penal settlement at Mazaruni in 1842 brought some relief to the overcrowded county and district prisons.

Image: Plan of HMPS Mazaruni, 1842  
TNA, CO 111/209

Despite the colonial government's hope that convicts would be more easily reformed away from the negative influences of the urban centres of the colony, the settlement was plagued by scandal during its first decade.

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*TNA, CO 111/263/7*

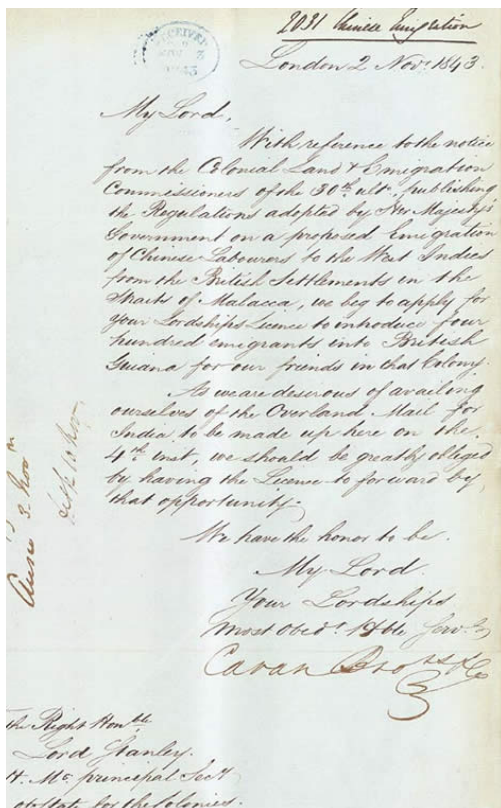


# Changes to the Prison System

After a period of relative stability during the 1840s, yearly admissions rapidly increased during the 1850s to 4313, 2.9% of the general population. The total continued to rise throughout the 1860s, until its colonial-era peak in 1869 with 6383 committals, 4.3% of the general population. This increase can be attributed to the colonial state's desire to use prisons to punish breaches of labour laws by indentured immigrants.

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TNA, CO 111/383/25, CO 116/238



During the second half of the nineteenth century, 13,533 Chinese and 239,000 Indian immigrants were introduced as labourers to the colony.

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Auguier, Gordon, Hall, Reckord 1960

The British established separate institutions specifically for their penal confinement, in Fellowship (1868) and Suddie (1875). They also re-opened the previously closed district prison at Mahaica in 1868 for the same purpose.

Image: Request from British Guiana for 300 Chinese labourers, 1843. TNA, CO 318/160

A further phase of construction in 1870 increased the settlement's capacity to 248. Attempts were also made to improve the sanitary conditions of the site with the installation of cell ventilators and the cultivation of para grass.

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# Penal Labour

## Punitive Labour

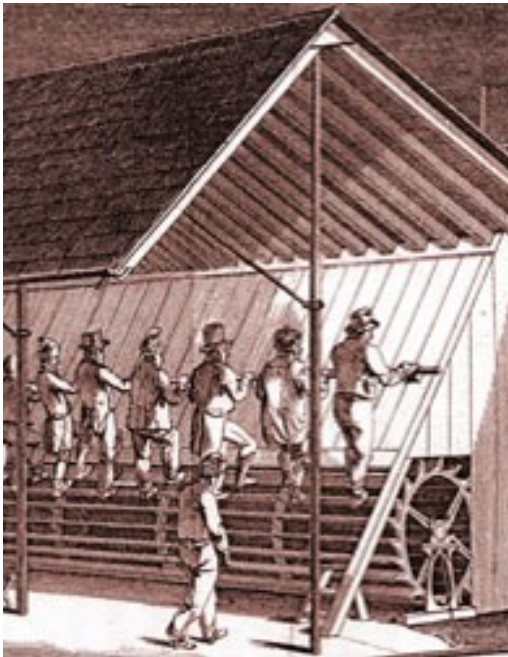


Image: View of the tread-mill, Brixton, Surrey 1821  
London Metropolitan Archives, PR. L1:BRI

1. 1857: Treadmill introduced to the settlement.

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2. 1865: Under the 1865 Prison Act men (aged 16 years and over) sentenced to hard labour were required to serve a 3 month probationary period, 3 weeks for those summarily convicted by a magistrate, within the prison.

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3. 1867-1871: Male prisoners sentenced to hard labour were required to work at shot drill for 8 hours a day during their probation period.

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4. 1871-1893: 12 cranks used for refractory prisoners. Prisoners were required to complete 5,000 to 10,000 revolutions per day.

*The use of unproductive labour ceased at the penal settlement in 1893*

## Productive Labour

*For the remainder of their sentences prisoners were required to labour on public works*

1. All prisoners were required to work in association on the sea wall at the Georgetown depot, breaking stone, logging, quarrying, and tending to the requirements of the prison. This included growing vegetables for use at the prison and Kaow Leper Asylum.

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2. Hours of Labour: 10 hours a day.  
6.00am to 10.00am & 12.00pm to 6.00pm.

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3. By 1853 the penal settlement was deemed self-sufficient due to the development of the quarrying, logging and agricultural departments.

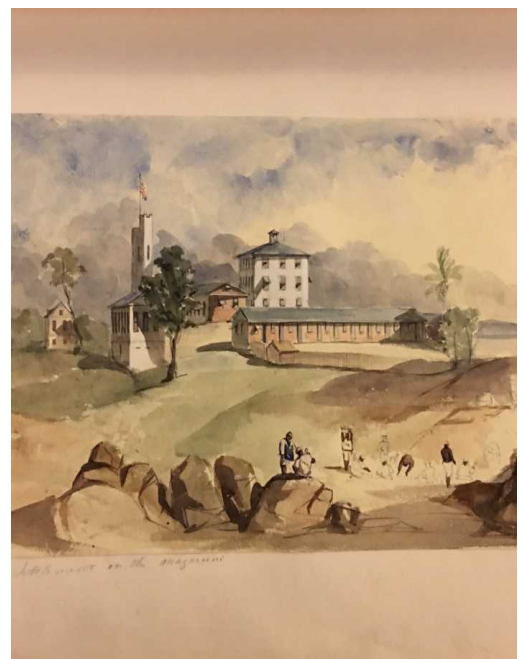
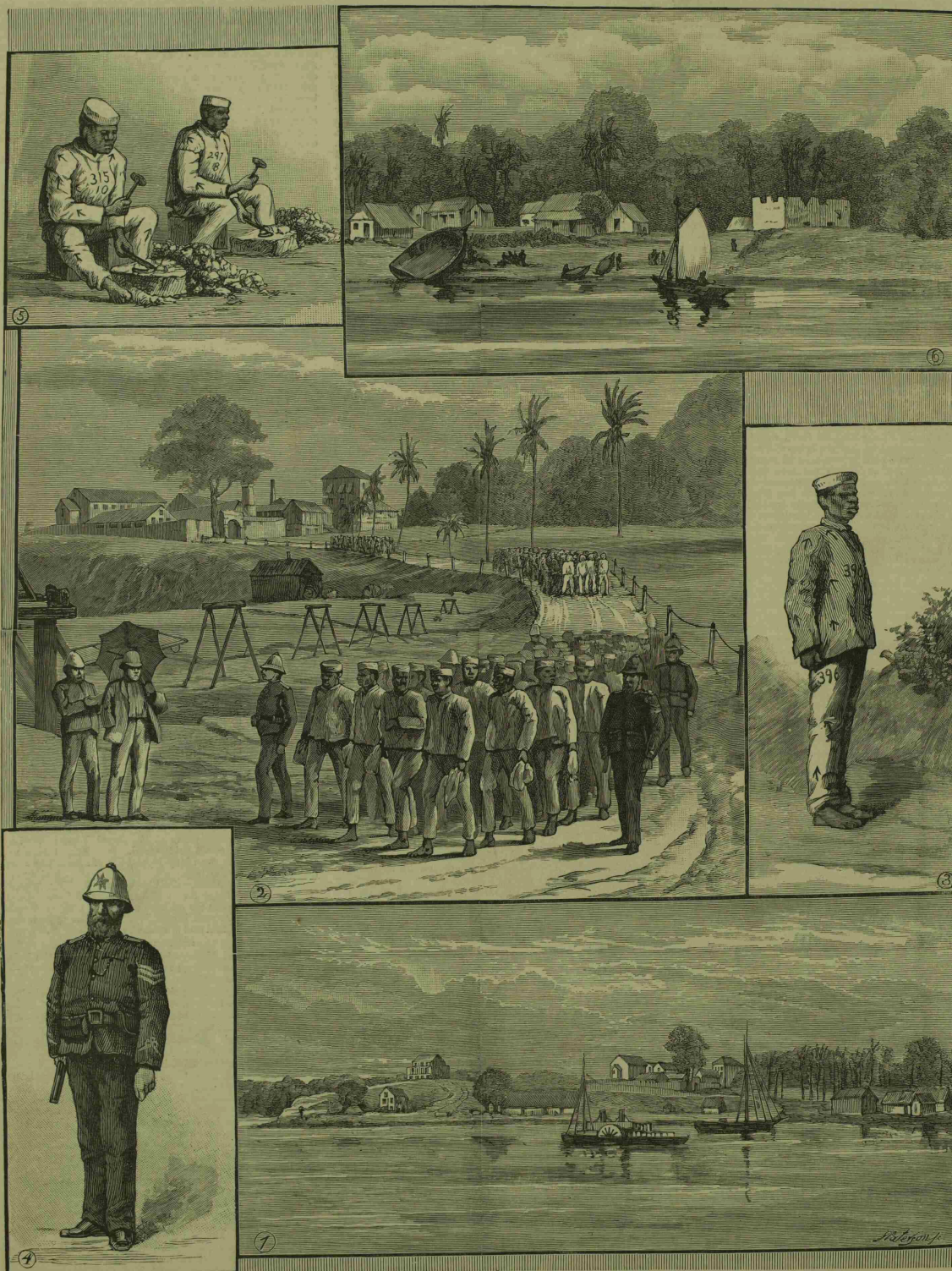


Image: Watercolour of Mazaruni quarry, 1843  
The British Library



ACROSS TWO OCEANS: SKETCHES IN BRITISH GUIANA, BY OUR SPECIAL ARTIST, MR. MELTON PRIOR.



1. Penal Establishment on the Mazaruni River. 2. Convicts going to bathe. 3. A Convict. 4. A Warder. 5. Convicts breaking Stones. 6. Fort Island, Essequibo.

Image © Illustrated London News Group

The Illustrated London News article on Mazaruni penal settlement, 1888

# Rehabilitation

## Vocational Labour



Image: Mazaruni Prison Garden, 2019  
Obrey James

1.

The resources at the penal settlement enabled the convicts to gain valuable skills. In addition to the public works prisoners were also able to work as carpenters, cooks, tailors, blacksmiths and wardsmen.

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2.

In recognition of the reforming benefits of labour, in 1855 a ticket of leave system was introduced for convicts of good character. Those released on a ticket of leave were required to enter into one year indentures with an employer of their choice until the expiration of their sentences.

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3.

The practice of rescinding a ticket of leave for trivial offences ensured few complaints against those with a ticket arose.

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## Education

1.

Education was one of the essential ingredients considered in the rehabilitation of prisoners. Prayers, classes and general visitations were provided daily by the Resident Chaplain.

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2.

From 1880 to 1930 classes were conducted by the Chaplain and 'intelligent officers' for three hours on Wednesday afternoons for prisoners under probation at the penal settlement.

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3.

Following the closure of Mazaruni penal settlement (between the years 1930-1939) educational opportunities were introduced to Georgetown and New Amsterdam prison on a more regular basis.





## Internal Discipline

1.

Before 1847, the use of irons or violence in the enforcement of convict labour was strictly forbidden. The guards were instead required to rely on their moral influence to encourage good behaviour.

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2.

Due to concerns over the number of convicts going on to reoffend, in 1847 new regulations were introduced that empowered officers to seclude and chain convicts during their hours of rest.

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3.

Sawpits, the stocks (limited use after 1859), reduced rations, the crank and flogging were frequently used as a means to engage unruly convicts in laborious work.

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## Punishment



Image: Whipping-frame & cat o' nine tails, Wormwood Scrubs Prison, London, 1895. TNA, Copy 1/420

## Management of Mazaruni

1.

Reports of abuse raised concerns at the settlement in 1848 following a rise in mortality. A special commission of enquiry concluded that infrequent inspections and a lack of regulations had created a regime of fear and cruelty.

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2.

Reports of mismanagement and cruelty at the settlement were again raised in 1858. A report by the commissioner objected to the 'perpetual and degrading infliction of corporal punishment' used to check the repetition of offences.

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3.

Despite numerous alterations to its structure and protocols Mazaruni penal settlement closed in 1930. The prison reopened in 1939 with accommodation for just 110 due to the deterioration of the buildings during its closure.

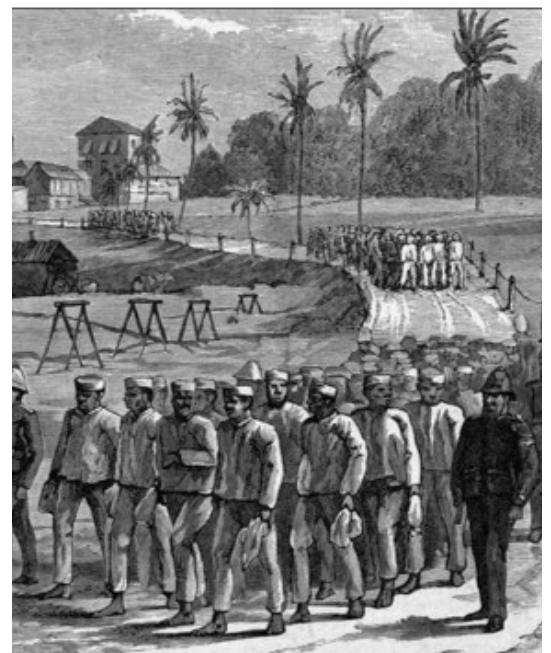


Image: Prisoners going to bathe at the settlement  
*The Illustrated London News*, 1888



# Need for Change

Overcrowding in Guyana's jails in the post independence period has been a serious issue with occupancy levels currently at almost 129%.

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*World Prison Brief Data, 2019*

Following the riot at Georgetown prison in which 17 prisoners died a commission of inquiry into overcrowding highlighted the need to provide better accommodation for prisoners and officers.

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*Ministry of Public Security, Guyana, 2017*



Image: Mazaruni prison, 2019  
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# The Future of Mazaruni Prison



Image: Mazaruni prison, 2018  
Obrey James

Following a comprehensive examination of the security sector in 2017 approximately \$1.5 billion was awarded to Guyana's Prison Service to address the expansion and rehabilitation of the prison infrastructure. Planned improvements at Mazaruni include living accommodation for prison officers, inmate cell blocks and preparation of land for agriculture.

*Ministry of Public Security, Guyana, 2017*

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# History and Security Sector Reform: Crime and Punishment in British Colonial Guyana 1814-1966

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Image: Mazaruni prison, 2018  
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If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to get in touch with a member of the team.

# References

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