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## **Prisons minister Rory Stewart speaks of his visit to Birmingham jail after G4S stripped of right to run it**

Rory Stewart has spoken of his visit to Birmingham Prison just days after the Government stripped private contractor G4S of its right to run the crisis-hit jail. The Penrith and the Border MP - who became the prisons minister in January - said his visit convinced him bosses at the Category B prison were not in control. Though he spent only a morning touring the prison, he was confronted by prisoners openly flouting the rules as they smoked in front of staff, as well as evidence of squalid conditions. "I felt this was one of the worst prisons in the country," said Mr Stewart. "We have taken a very unusual step, which hasn't been done before: the government is actually taking over a private prison. "That was because having received some very worrying reports I sent in a team from the Ministry of Justice to work with them and I visited myself last week. "I am absolutely convinced that G4S was not going to be able to turn this round on their own." Mr Stewart, who has said he will stand down if issues surrounding trouble and drug use in prisons does not improve within a year, spoke of how prisoners did not seem calm. "I did not feel that the prison officers knew what they were doing," said the minister. "I had no confidence in the existing management. "There was paint on the floor which had been there for over a year because prisoners had been throwing it at prison officers." He also saw one cell that was completely flooded. "There were prisoners leaning on the gallery, openly smoking, which they are not supposed to be doing under the rules; and this was when they knew that a minister would be visiting. It just wasn't decent, clean, orderly, and well run." Since the Government took over the prison, shocking details about the daily life of inmates there, with an inspection finding evidence of some prisoners regularly using drink, drugs and violence. Drugs were said to be widespread, even in segregation units. Of the drug use at the prison, Mr Stewart said: "Prison officers have not been getting the basics right, searching people properly at the door." According to the prisons' Independent Monitoring Board, specific examples of the problems found included a prisoner who returned to a blood-spattered cell after his fellow inmate had been assaulted. He was given replacement bedding that was soiled, the board said. Cell toilets with no screen, broken showers and "ever present" cockroaches contributed to the "unfit" living conditions. Mr Stewart, who has visited prisons all over the north since taking up his role within the Ministry of Justice, said the crisis at the prison was not linked to it being privately run. "We have good, privately-run prisons across the country and while Birmingham faces its own particular set of challenges, I am absolutely clear that it must start to live up to the standards seen elsewhere," he said. He confirmed that the governor has been removed and that the company would have to look seriously at their training. Mr Stewart said the take-over would not be a cost to tax payers but it would have an impact on the company. "This is a really major blow to them," he added. A Category B prison is one where the inmates are deemed not to merit maximum security, but for whom escape still needs to be made very difficult.