

Human rights survey depllores Soviet prison camp conditions

Michael Simmons

THE gulag lives on in today's Soviet Union, according to a survey by a conservative pressure group, the International Society of Human Rights (ISHR).

Prisoners freed a few weeks ago, following an amnesty granted by the Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, told the ISHR they had been pardoned against their will, since they were not guilty of the crimes for which they were committed. One insisted he would not apply for rehabilitation since he could accept nothing from even the present Soviet regime.

During a tour of Soviet penal institutions last month, an ISHR team found things had changed little since the 1930s, when millions were forced into labour camps on false charges.

At camp UG-42/14, near Archangel and close to the Arctic Circle, one of the prisoners, Viktor Bondarenko, said: "They're very free with the rubber truncheon, they don't open the shop, and we can't get a wash."

Despite several suicide attempts, Mr Bondarenko said

he had been put in a punishment cell, beaten with truncheons, and sprayed in the face with tear gas last September.

Prisoners, he added, were confined for days at a time to an outdoor exercise yard with hardly any clothes on, even when it was raining or below freezing.

During the August coup against President Gorbachev, according to Mr Bondarenko, the prison staff "got their clubs ready" and challenged anyone who supported Boris Yeltsin to step forward.

A former prisoner, Kiril Podrabinek, said UG-42/14 was "no worse than a great many others". At Tobolsk camp in central Siberia, the visitors were told, prisoners had been deliberately frozen to death; at Lipetsk, south of Moscow, prisoners were so poorly fed they resembled Nazi concentration camp victims. "In various prisons and camps across the country, inmates are killed, crippled, tortured, starved, and driven to suicide," Mr Podrabinek said. "The most horrifying thing about UG-42/14 is that it is nothing out of the ordinary."