Robot guards being tested in South Korea

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(Phys.org) -- South Korea, a nation with a self-proclaimed goal of being a leader in robotics technology has, through the Asian Forum of Corrections (AFC), begun testing the feasibility of using robots as prison guards in an actual prison in Pohang. The robots' duties, at least initially, are to patrol the halls between cells looking for signs of trouble, and if it finds it, alert the human guards who will take appropriate action.

The robot, called Robo-Guard by many in the press, is equipped with several cameras, one of which is 3D, microphone, speaker and circuitry and software that allow it to roam autonomously in predefined areas

within the prison. It also has software that allows it to analyze behavioral characteristics of [inmates](link) to help in deciding whether to alert the human guards. Its main purpose, according to the AFC, is to reduce manpower costs in prisons and to make a safer environment for both inmates and those that guard them.

It also appears that the South Korean government, which has paid for the development of the robots, is using its prison population as a test ground for bolstering its [robotics technology](link) in general. After all, most, if not all of what these new robots do could just as easily be done by installing cameras in every hall and cell and connecting them to a computer that does the processing. But, because the testing is done in an environment where test subjects don't have the option of objecting, research can be carried out that would not be possible in any other environment.

In addition to patrolling the halls, the robots are also able to serve as wireless two-way communications devices, allowing inmates and guards to communicate without the guard having to leave the command center. The human guards can also manually control the actions of the robots using an iPad application.

The current test trial, which employs the use of three robots, is set to run for just one month and to cost a little over three quarters of a million dollars; at the end of which, researchers and politicians presumably will determine if the idea is feasible and whether the program ought to become permanent. If it does, the AFC has said they'd like to get the robots to one day perform body searches, though it's not likely they would be capable of searching body cavities, instead they would perhaps be able to frisk inmates randomly, which likely would reduce the number of homemade weapons inmates use to harm one another or their guards.

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