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California's prison isolation units remain inhumane despite proposals to amend policies

Amnesty International welcomes proposals by the California prison authorities to provide a route out of isolation for validated gang members through a step-down process.

However, Amnesty International remains deeply concerned by conditions in the state's Security Housing Unit (SHU) units, which fall short of international standards for humane treatment.

Prisoners are confined for 22 hours a day in single or double cells, which in Pelican Bay have no windows to the outside or direct access to natural light and cell doors which significantly impede vision and look onto a bare wall. Such conditions are contrary to international standards which provide that prisoners should have access to natural light and should not be held in conditions of reduced sensory stimulation.

Prisoners in Pelican Bay are allowed solitary exercise for 10 hours a week, in small high-walled concrete yards with no view to the outside. In other SHU units the yards have given way to bare, single, cages.

The proposed step-down program – announced by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation last week – takes place in four stages, each lasting a minimum of 12 months. The plan does not appear to include physical changes to the SHU units nor does it allow any group interaction for at least the first two years, Amnesty International said. The organization is concerned by both the conditions and the long periods in which prisoners will remain confined to cells while completing the process.

In a report to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly last year the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture noted evidence that solitary confinement, even for a limited period, could cause serious psychological harm. He called on states to isolate prisoners only in exceptional circumstances, for as short a time as possible. He defined solitary confinement as the "physical and social isolation of individuals who are confined to their cells for 22 to 24 hours a day".

Amnesty International, which visited California's SHU units in November last year, said that conditions inside the cells, and the poverty of the exercise facilities were of great concern, as was the length of time prisoners were confined to cells.

The organization is calling on the California authorities to ensure that its proposals will include changes to conditions in the unit, with more out of cell time and better exercise facilities for all prisoners.

The organization is also urging the authorities to allow SHU prisoners to have telephone contact with their families. At present SHU prisoners are denied all phone calls except in emergencies, exacerbating their isolation from the outside world. The new proposals would allow no change during the first year and only one phone call to family members after completion of the first year and two the following year.

In November 2011 an Amnesty International delegation toured the SHU units in three California prisons at Pelican Bay, Corcoran and Valley State Prison for Women. Following its visit the organization sought more information from the department about its SHU policies and populations; it is currently preparing a detailed report.