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News Service: 037/99

AI INDEX: AMR 51/32/99

EMBARGOED UNTIL 0501 GMT 4 MARCH 1999

USA: Rough justice for women behind bars

“ My feet were still shackled together, and I couldn't get my legs apart. The doctor called for the officer ... No one else could unlock the shackles, and my baby was coming ... Finally the officer came and unlocked the shackles from my ankles. My baby was born then.”
(“Maria Jones” describing how she gave birth while an inmate of Cook County Jail, Chicago, 1998)

The use of shackles on pregnant inmates is just one example of the cruelty and ill-treatment many women suffer in US jails and prisons, Amnesty International said today in a new report issued as part of its international campaign against human rights violations in the USA.

As well as the use of restraints on pregnant and sick prisoners, Amnesty International's report -- “*Not part of my sentence*”-- details human rights violations including sexual abuse, lack of medical care and lengthy periods of confinement in so-called super-maximum units.

Reports of rape and other forms of sexual abuse -- including sexually offensive language and male staff touching women's breasts and genitals during searches or watching them when they are naked -- are widespread in US prisons and jails.

“Cases of sexual abuse actually reported are probably only the tip of the iceberg as victims are often reluctant to complain for fear of not being believed or suffering retaliation,” Amnesty International said.

“The overwhelming majority of complaints concern male staff, reflecting the fact that many guards and other prison employees are male,” the organization added.

The number of women in US jails and prisons has been growing dramatically, largely as a result of the war on drugs. In 1997 the figure was at 138,000 -- a three-fold increase since 1985. This amounts to about 10 times the number of women prisoners in Western European countries, which combined have a female population the same size as the USA.

“Authorities around the USA have been spending large sums of money building new prisons and jails but have not provided adequate funds for the health, welfare and rehabilitation of the people they are locking up,” Amnesty International said.

As the world celebrates International Women's Day on 8 March, Amnesty International is calling on US federal, state and local authorities to make a strong

commitment to implement the measures required to effectively protect the safety, health and dignity of all women in custody.

Concerns expressed in the report include:

- **Sexual abuse:** rape of an inmate by staff is internationally recognized as a form of torture and violates US federal and state criminal laws, yet reports of rape and other forms of sexual abuse are common in US prisons and jails. Amnesty International is calling for female inmates to be supervised by female staff only, and for victims to be more effectively protected from retaliation if they report abuses.
- **Medical care:** access to a doctor is often conditional on permission by non-medical staff, who may underestimate the seriousness of the case or be inclined not to believe inmates. In some cases, delays are reported to have had serious health consequences. In 1998 an inmate in an Arizona Jail wrote to Amnesty International reporting that she had lost her baby -- and almost bled to death -- after her call for urgent medical attention was left unheeded for hours. Amnesty International is urging that all women in custody have access to free and adequate medical care.
- **Mental health care:** there are concerns about the use of psychotropic drugs and a reported lack of counselling. Amnesty International is calling for an inquiry into prison mental health services and for women suffering from severe mental illnesses to be transferred to mental health institutions.
- **Use of physical restraints on sick and pregnant women:** handcuffs and shackles are often used on women both during transport and in hospital even if they do not have a history of violence or escape. In the case of pregnant women, restraints pose a serious health threat. Amnesty International is calling for the use of restraints to be limited to cases in which the inmates' conduct makes them necessary.
- **Super-maximum security units:** some women appear to be sent to such units -- where conditions are particularly harsh -- for comparatively minor infractions. Some of the rules in those units -- such as the one requiring that prisoners be "in full view" all the time -- violate the inmates' privacy and dignity, and their isolated nature can increase the opportunities for abuse.

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To obtain a copy of the report -- a condensed version of which is also available -- or to arrange an interview, please call the Amnesty International Press Office on + 44 171 413 5566/5808.