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USA: unnecessary death, injury and pain caused by the use of restraint chairs

Amnesty International called on US federal authorities to initiate a national inquiry into the use of restraint chairs in detention centres and jails following four deaths between February 2000 and August 2001, as well as many cases of abuse and ill-treatment involving their use.

"Inadequate training and supervision of detention officers has caused unnecessary pain, injury and even death," the organization said today as it launched a new report "USA: The restraint chair - How many more deaths?"

"The latest casualties are part of a disturbing pattern of deaths, torture and ill-treatment involving the use of the restraint chair in US prisons and jails since it was introduced nearly a decade ago".

Amnesty International is extremely concerned about the growing use of these devices that consist of a metal framed chair in which prisoners are immobilized in four-point restraints securing both arms and legs, with a strap across the chest. Their use appears to be virtually unregulated in many US jurisdictions.

The organization has received many reports of prisoners being placed in restraint chairs as punishment for minor acts of non-compliance, contrary to US and international standards on the use of restraints. It has also been used to subdue or control disturbed or mentally ill inmates.

At least 11 other inmates have died after being placed in restraint chairs in the USA in recent years. However, the true number of deaths and injuries may be higher.

Recent deaths include those of:

- Charles Agster, a 33-year-old mentally handicapped man died after being placed in a restraint chair on 6 August 2001 in Maricopa Street Jail, Arizona. Prior to being placed in the restraint chair, Agster was placed in a "rip-restraint" (a form of hog-tie in which his arms were handcuffed behind his back, his legs bound together at the ankle with a leather strap, and a strap tied between the handcuffs and leg strap). Agster was allegedly dragged face-down and strapped into a restraint chair, still in the rip restraint, with a hood over his head. He was noticed not to be breathing minutes later. Amnesty International is concerned that the degree of force used against Agster was grossly disproportionate to any threat posed by him.

- Hazel Virginia Beyer died on 7 March 2001 after being placed in a restraint chair in Johnson City Jail, Tennessee. She had slipped down in the chair so that the restraining straps had tightened around her throat, choking her. Hazel Beyer was clearly at risk: she was three times over the legal limit of alcohol when she was placed in the chair and she clearly needed more stringent observation. According to local sources, officers failed to physically check her restraints while she was in the chair but observed her through a small window.

Background

Although restraint chairs have been promoted by their manufacturers as safer than other forms of four-point restraint since the prisoner remains upright in a sitting position, there appears to have been no independent testing as to their safety. Amnesty International is

particularly concerned that the chairs are prone to abuse because they are so easily deployed and their use is virtually unregulated in many jurisdictions.

In May 2000, the United Nations (UN) Committee against Torture issued recommendations to the US government to abolish the use of restraint chairs as a method of restraining people in custody on the grounds that their use led to breaches of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment.

The report "USA: The restraint chair - How many more deaths?" can be viewed at:

<http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/amr51312002>

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