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Human rights in the USA: World leader in high tech repression

Thousands of people across the USA are falling victim to human rights violations, often carried out with high tech repression tools: electro-shock devices, chemical sprays and lethal injections, Amnesty International said today, as it launched its first worldwide campaign on the country's human rights situation.

“Law enforcement officials in the USA -- from police to prison staff -- have a huge array of equipment at their disposal which at times is contributing to human rights violations,” said Pierre Sané, Amnesty International's Secretary General.

“A greater focus on the punishment rather than the rehabilitation of prisoners has led to cuts in programs, facilities and treatments in many prisons -- with prison authorities turning to other ways of controlling prisoners.”

This trend has been marked by the use of mechanical restraints -- four-point, steel-framed restraint chairs and boards, chains or leg-irons -- plus a growth in the use of high tech repression methods, some of which are cruel, painful and often life-threatening. They range from supermaximum security units, stun guns and tasers to execution by lethal injection.

“As part of our campaign, we'll be calling on the US authorities to immediately ban the use of stun belts -- one of the most worrying electro-shock devices,” Mr Sané said. “The stun belt is, by its very nature, an instrument designed to instill fear and pain. Even if the button is never pressed, the constant threat of such a jolt is inhumane -- and one of the most patent symbols of the current dangerous trend towards the erosion of basic human rights in the USA.”

The use of stun belts came to the fore in June this year, when a California judge ordered its use against a defendant who had repeatedly interrupted her in a court proceeding. The belt -- which a guard can activate at the push of a button -- inflicts a powerful electric current, causing severe pain and instant incapacitation. According to the manufacturer's literature, the belt will knock prisoners to the ground and may cause them to involuntarily defecate or urinate.

Prisoners are not the only victims of these high tech methods. Police officers in some areas -- particularly California -- also resort to stun guns or tasers to incapacitate a suspect, and at least 3,000 police departments currently use pepper spray despite mounting concern about its health risks -- particularly for people with asthma or heart conditions.

“Pepper spray has been cruelly used on people already restrained -- liquid pepper spray has been dabbed in the eyes of demonstrators and sprayed on the genitals of a protester -- which

is tantamount to torture,” Amnesty International argues. “People have died after receiving high voltage jolts from electro-shock weapons.”

“The US authorities must urgently review the use of pepper spray, and suspend the use of electro-shock weapons pending an independent and impartial review,” Mr Sané stressed.

High-tech repression methods are just part of a wide range of issues Amnesty International will be highlighting during the campaign. According to Mr Sané, “sanctions against those responsible for human rights abuses in the USA are often inadequate, and there are clear signs that unless urgent steps are taken, the rights of people in the country -- particularly those of minority groups -- will be further eroded.”

Amnesty International has published a comprehensive report of the current human rights situation in the USA, to accompany the launch of the campaign. The report highlights:

- **A widespread and persistent pattern of police brutality:** Police abuse is such a widespread problem in the USA that millions of dollars are paid out every year to alleged victims. Reports of discriminatory treatment by police toward racial and ethnic minorities are common, and black people arrested for minor offences, for instance, appear particularly liable to suffer police brutality. The vast majority of complaints relate to police officers beating people during arrests, searches, traffic stops or street incidents -- especially in inner cities with large minority groups

Many suspects in police custody have died while forced face down in restraints -- most often when being “hogtied” with wrists and ankles tied together. While a number of police departments have now banned this method, others continue to use it.

- **Endemic physical and sexual violence against prisoners:** The USA’s current response to crime centres on the imposition of harsher punishments, and the country now has one of the largest prison populations in the world. Some prisons show a high level of inmate on inmate violence -- with guards at times inciting attacks or not acting to prevent them. Inmates have also been beaten by guards and subjected to sexual abuse, including rape -- a form of torture.

A particularly disturbing development is the growth of high-tech security units, where inmates are placed in long-term or even permanent isolation. Prisoners, many of them mentally ill, are frequently placed in mechanical restraints for hours or days on end. Despite being outlawed under international standards, shackling of prisoners -- including their transportation in leg irons -- is widespread in the US prison system. In some jurisdictions pregnant women have been shackled.

Not all sectors of society are equally affected by this, however. In a country still struggling to eradicate racial discrimination, more than 60 per cent of prisoners come from racial minorities. Up to one third of all young black men are in jail or prison, or on parole or probation.

- **The death penalty - An arbitrary, unfair and racist punishment:** The death penalty is now a political campaigning tool in the USA, and it is being applied in a racist way. Black and white people are the victims of violent crime in roughly equal numbers, yet 82 per cent of people executed since 1977 have been convicted of killing white victims.

Factors like aggravating circumstances cannot explain this disparity.

In violation of international standards, executions of the mentally impaired and juvenile offenders continue in the USA. In addition, at a time when there is a worrying escalation in the number of executions, many capital defendants are not receiving adequate legal representation.

Most US states have now adopted execution by lethal injection, claiming that it is “more humane”. But the cruelty of this punishment is inescapable, regardless of the method used, and in many cases, inmates have suffered prolonged deaths due to medical staff having trouble finding a vein to inject the poison, or by having to wait with needles in their arms while last minutes appeals were heard.

●**Incarceration of asylum-seekers:** Growing numbers of people fleeing persecution are finding themselves behind bars after arriving in the USA. Asylum seekers have committed no crime, yet they are often held in jails and prisons with criminal prisoners. Unlike criminal suspects, they are often denied bail and do not know when they will be released.

Asylum-seekers held in these conditions are not differentiated from other inmates: they are often held in inhumane conditions, strip searched, shackled, chained and verbally or physically abused. They are often prevented from meeting with their lawyers, interpreters and asylum organizations. Women asylum-seekers are more likely than men to be detained with criminals, and there is a lack of alternative accommodation for children -- who according to international law should be kept together with their families and never be held in detention.

●**Arms exports -- the US contribution to human rights abuses in other countries:** As the world’s largest producer and exporter of arms, the US contributes to human rights abuse by supplying equipment and training to governments and armed groups known to have carried out torture, political killings and other abuses. The type of electro-shock weapons exported by the USA have been used to torture victims around the world, and are now banned in some Western European countries and in Canada. In the USA, too little is being done to ensure that such equipment is not being used to commit human rights violations -- current US laws and procedures are just not addressing the problem.

“Given its prominent role in the global arms market, the USA should aim for full transparency regarding all transfers, and adopt a Code of Conduct aimed at stopping torturing countries from acquiring both the technology and the know-how,” Mr Sané said. “Any transfer likely to contribute to human rights abuses should be immediately stopped.”

●**Reluctance to abide by international standards:** Despite the USA’s leading role in establishing the international system of human rights protection, it has been reluctant to submit itself to international scrutiny and to abide by the same minimum standards that it demands from other countries. In addition, the level of human rights protection recognized in US law often falls short of some of the minimum standards set down in international treaties, and important internationally recognized rights and standards are not always reflected in domestic US law -- like the ban on using the death penalty against juvenile offenders.

Amnesty International will call on the US authorities to put an end to their selective approach in the application of international law at home and abroad, and to adjust the country's legislation to conform with international standards.

In particular, the USA should ratify without reservations all international human rights treaties -- specially those that protect women and children -- and withdraw its reservations to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention Against Torture.

“The US federal and state authorities are failing to deliver to many of their people the wealth of civil and political rights guaranteed under international law and the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Amnesty International will be actively campaigning to obtain from the US authorities a renewed commitment to placing humans rights protection at the heart of US domestic and foreign policy,” Pierre Sané concluded.

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For further information, to arrange an interview (English, Spanish, French or Arabic) or to request a copy of the the report *USA: Rights for All* -- please phone Amnesty International's press office on +44 171 413 5566 / 5808

Amnesty International now has an ISDN line for studio-quality radio interviews from their offices in London, please phone for further details.

Amnesty International's USA Campaign Web-site: <http://www.rightsforall-usa.org>