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USA called to action by UN Committee against Torture

Geneva -- The US Government must live up to its obligations under the Convention against Torture, Amnesty International said welcoming today's recommendations of the UN Committee against Torture.

The Committee highlighted areas of concern including torture and ill-treatment by police and prison guards -- much of it racially motivated; the sexual abuse of female prisoners by guards; prisoner chain gangs; and the "excessively harsh regime" of supermaximum security prisons.

They also urged the USA to abolish electro-shock stun belts and restraint chairs, stating that their use "almost invariably" leads to breaches of the Convention; and to cease holding juveniles with adults in prisons.

"The Committee's findings focussed on practices which we have repeatedly raised with the US authorities as contributing to torture or ill-treatment," Amnesty International said, calling on the government to implement the recommendations without delay.

The Committee also recommended that the USA withdraw all "reservations, interpretations and understandings" on which it conditioned its acceptance of the treaty. These included a reservation to Article 16, in which the USA agreed to be bound by the Convention only

to the extent that it matches the ban on cruel punishment contained in the US Constitution.

"This should send a clear message that the USA needs to seriously review its pick and choose approach to international standards," said AI, pointing out that this is not the first time the US has been criticized for its limited recognition of human rights treaties.

Its reservations to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights -- whereby the USA retained the right to execute juvenile offenders and to incarcerate some children with adults -- was criticized by the Human Rights Committee in 1995.

"We will be taking up the Committee's findings with the US government," Amnesty International said. "This will include some additional concerns which the Committee raised during last week's hearings but did not address specifically in its recommendations: such as the conditions of detention of asylum seekers and juveniles held on death row."

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