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**AUSTRALIA: HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS ROOTED IN SYSTEMIC
DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ABORIGINES**

SYDNEY-- Australia's criminal justice system remains heavily weighted against Aboriginal people, Amnesty International said at a press conference today.

An Amnesty International delegation visiting Australia since the start of March found that indigenous Australians still run a disproportionately high risk of arrest, detention and death in custody. A pattern of ill-treatment and arbitrary arrests occurs against a backdrop of systemic discrimination against Aborigines, the human rights organization said.

"We are appalled to see what little progress has been made in addressing these abuses since our last visit to Australia in 1992," said Heinz Schurmann-Zeggel, Amnesty International's researcher on Australia.

"The way the criminal justice and penal systems function makes Aborigines particularly vulnerable to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. The high rate of Aboriginal deaths in custody is also due to the dramatically disproportionate representation of Aboriginal people in detention."

"If you are an Aboriginal teenager in Australia today, you are 18 times more likely to end up in jail or in juvenile detention than your non-Aboriginal peers," Mr Schurmann-Zeggel said.

Alleged ill-treatment by police officers has been reported to the Amnesty International delegation almost daily since it arrived in the country. The delegates were also told that police continue to intimidate and harass relatives who do not accept official explanations about deaths in custody and instead have called for further investigations.

The Amnesty International team reported that some prisoners have been kept in leg-irons, handcuffs and chains for up to 24 hours a day and over a period of several days.

In one case, an Aboriginal man was assaulted by four police officers and sustained head injuries from the use of batons. More than 26 months after an initial complaint had been lodged, the Director of Public Prosecutions found that there was evidence on which one of the officers should have been charged with assault occasioning bodily harm. However, for technical legal reasons, the officer could no longer be charged.

The delegates stressed that non-Aboriginal people have also suffered ill-treatment and harassment by the police. Amnesty International has been following the case of Stephen Wardle, who died in East Perth Lock-up in 1988. Since then, his family has suffered continuous harassment by police officers, who have searched the family home several times in their absence, and the homes of an aunt and the family solicitor.

The delegation has identified areas in which progress has been made since its 1992 visit, including more appropriate lock-up conditions and improved Aboriginal-police relations in some communities. However, the team reported that the overall human rights situation remains serious, particularly regarding the implementation of the recommendations made in 1991 by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

The Amnesty International delegation is in Australia until 30 March. While in the country, the team has met victims of human rights violations, representatives of non-governmental organizations and academic institutions, senior police officials, government ministers and officials in metropolitan areas, country towns and remote communities.

The Amnesty International delegation will provide further details on their preliminary findings at a press conference at the Hogarth Galleries in Sydney at 1pm, on 29 March 1996.

For more information about the press conference, and to arrange interviews with members of the delegation while they are in Sydney, please contact:

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