

19 January 2001

AI Index AMR 51/010/2001 - News Service Nr. 11

USA: A new President - renewed hope for human rights?

George W. Bush can have the political courage to take a strong step towards improving human rights in the USA, or allow the country to continue flouting the rights of its citizens, Amnesty International said today as it delivered a letter to Bush on the eve of his inauguration as 43rd US President.

In its letter, Amnesty International urges George W. Bush to put human rights at the forefront of his administration's agenda: "The USA was founded in the name of democracy, equality and individual freedom, but is failing to deliver the fundamental promise of protecting rights for all," the organization said.

During his presidency, Bill Clinton claimed the USA had become "the leading force for human rights around the world". Despite this claim, Amnesty International believes President Clinton missed many key opportunities to live up to the human rights principles he has so often claimed to support during his term in office.

"The USA consistently labels itself as a champion of human rights," stated Amnesty International. "It must now live up to its' human rights promises."

These promises are to be found in the USA's own laws as well as in international human rights standards. However, Amnesty International's letter to George W. Bush spells out exactly how the USA is failing its' own citizens. Serious human rights violations persist within the USA, particularly in relation to the criminal justice system:

- Police brutality, racism, torture and ill-treatment in jails and prisons continue to be widely reported;
- Electro-shock weapons and other restraints continue to be misused by police and corrections officials;
- Cruel conditions still persist in segregation units;
- Detained children and asylum-seekers are still ill-treated;
- Juvenile offenders still face the death penalty.

As Texas Governor, George W. Bush oversaw 152 executions with consistent violations of international standards. Violations - in Texas and elsewhere - have included the low quality of legal representation afforded to poor capital defendants, racial bias, and the execution of the mentally impaired and of juvenile offenders.

"We fear that Governor Bush's record on the death penalty does not bode well for efforts to rein the USA back from its increasing resort to judicial killing," said Amnesty International. "We will be urging President-elect Bush to adopt a broader awareness of human rights and international standards than he has displayed in Texas."

In its letter, Amnesty International has highlighted its concern at the USA's failure to uphold international standards: Only the USA and Somalia have failed to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a treaty ratified by 191 countries, that protects the fundamental human rights of children. The USA has also yet to ratify the Statute of the International Criminal Court; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; and the American Convention on Human Rights.

"We are calling on George W. Bush to act in accordance with his claim to be a compassionate leader and make human rights protection a central issue during his presidency."

"It is time to recognize the breadth of human rights concerns in the USA, and for the new President to find the political courage to stand up and address human rights protection in an honest and effective manner," said the organization.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 / Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>