

USA: Amnesty International calls for transfer of Connecticut prisoners from Virginia supermaximum security prison

Prisoners in a Virginia supermaximum security prison are routinely zapped with stun guns, racially abused by guards, and cruelly and unnecessarily placed in restraints, according to recent reports received by Amnesty International.

"These allegations are not new. We believe they may indicate a persistent pattern of institutionalized abuse in Virginia's supermaximum security prisons," stressed Angela Wright, Amnesty International's Researcher on the USA.

More than 100 of the inmates at Wallens Ridge State Prison -- a supermaximum security prison in Virginia -- are from Connecticut. Amnesty International is backing recommendations of a recent commission of inquiry to transfer the prisoners back to Connecticut. The organization is also renewing its call to the Virginia authorities to end abuses in its "supermax" prisons.

Investigations into the treatment of some 500 Connecticut inmates originally transferred to the unit were sparked by the death of two prisoners last year . This includes a diabetic prisoner from Connecticut, Lawrence Frazier, who died after being zapped with a 50,000 volt stun gun in July 2000. Ten months after his death, the autopsy reports have still to be released.

Concerns about Wallens Ridge State Prison include:

\$ Prisoners being strapped by the wrists and ankles, with additional straps across the chest and thighs -- so that they are completely immobilized -- for 48 hours or longer for minor offences.

\$ Black and Hispanic prisoners reporting that they were fired on with rubber pellets without warning for such "offences" as walking too fast or not walking in a straight line.

§ Mentally ill or disturbed prisoners being reportedly held in "supermax" facilities without adequate treatment or monitoring.

"We have repeatedly called on the Virginia authorities to investigate such abuses and to suspend the use of stun weapons because of their potentially harmful effects," said Angela Wright. "But the Virginia authorities have consistently failed to take firm action."

The Director of Virginia's prison system stated in a letter to Amnesty International last year that the department has "no intention of suspending the use of electro-shock weapons". Moreover, the department refused Amnesty International's request to visit Wallens Ridge and Virginia's other supermaximum security prison, Red Onion. The organization was investigating allegations of excessive use of force in these prisons.

Amnesty International is calling on the Connecticut authorities to implement the recommendations of the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities to "proceed as expeditiously as practicable" to remove its inmates from Wallens Ridge Prison. Pending such transfers, the authorities should take all measures to ensure that any Connecticut prisoners remaining in the facility are treated humanely.

Background

Wallens Ridge State Prison, opened in April 1999, is one of two "supermaximum" security (supermax) prisons in Virginia. The other facility, Red Onion State Prison, run on near-identical lines, was opened in August 1998. Both prisons, situated in remote rural areas, are staffed by predominantly white guards and house a large proportion of minority inmates -- many transferred from other states. Amnesty International has received complaints about both prisons since they opened.

In September 2000, the US Justice Department's Civil Rights Division opened an investigation into allegations of systematic abuses in Red Onion Prison. This investigation -- which includes claims of the misuse of electro-shock stun guns, restraints and racism -- remains ongoing. Amnesty International is

urging the Justice Department to conduct a similar investigation into Wallens Ridge.

The American Civil Liberties Union has also filed a lawsuit challenging the cruel use of five-point restraints and electro-shock weapons on Connecticut prisoners for minor offences at Wallens Ridge Prison. The lawsuit was filed against the Connecticut Department of Corrections as it remains responsible for the prisoners despite their transfer to Virginia. The department, however, is fighting the lawsuit and moving to have the case transferred from Connecticut to the more conservative courts in Virginia. The hearing is scheduled for 9 May.

Many of the allegations at Wallens Ridge came to light during an investigation by the Connecticut Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO). Its report raises concern about various aspects of the treatment of Connecticut prisoners at Wallens Ridge, including allegations of racist abuse of minority inmates by guards; limited access of prisoners to religious and other programs; and delayed or inadequate health care. The CHRO report also raises concern about the adequacy of the physical and mental health screening of Connecticut prisoners prior to their transfer to Virginia.

\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>