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United Kingdom: Public statement on Wormwood Scrubs

Amnesty International has been concerned about allegations of ill-treatment of prisoners in Wormwood Scrubs and in other prisons in England and Wales for several years. The criminal investigation into some of the allegations regarding Wormwood Scrubs led to the prosecution of 27 police officers and to the conviction of six, three of whom have been sentenced today.

Brutality against prisoners at Wormwood Scrubs in the 1990s did not consist of a few isolated incidents but of a pattern of systematic abuse by prison officers, according to evidence collected by lawyers over the years. These allegations led Amnesty International to urge the government in 1998 to establish a wide-ranging and independent inquiry into the abuses in Wormwood Scrubs, in order to examine what caused the failure of the existing mechanisms and complaints procedures to detect and deal with systematic abuse. Amnesty International stated that the inquiry should examine the roles of all the bodies who receive and deal with complaints: namely, the governors, the prison doctors, the board of visitors, the prison chaplains, educational personnel, and any other body or organization that may have received complaints. The inquiry should also examine the reasons why the Prison Service allowed the situation in Wormwood Scrubs to deteriorate over the years, despite warnings from various bodies during that time. Furthermore, the inquiry should explore ways of addressing "prison culture" in relation to abuses, in cases where the pervasiveness of violence and intimidation prevents prisoners from making complaints.

Three years later, with the end of criminal proceedings against some prison officers, Amnesty International repeats its call for a public judicial inquiry into the alleged pattern of systematic abuse at Wormwood Scrubs because:

1. Based on the information it has gathered and the reports it has received, Amnesty International believes that what happened at Wormwood Scrubs is not an isolated incident in England and Wales.

2. Criminal prosecutions do not deal with systemic failures.

3. Although looking specifically at Wormwood Scrubs, the inquiry's findings and recommendations would benefit the prison system as a whole. Through the examination and the exposure of the failure to take action of all those who shared the responsibility of ensuring the safety of the inmates of Wormwood Scrubs, and of the failures of the existing mechanisms and complaints procedures to detect and deal with systematic abuse, the systemic flaws, weaknesses and deficiencies would emerge.

Amnesty International considers that such an inquiry is of great importance to draw the necessary lessons, and make recommendations to ensure that future complaints of torture, ill-treatment and abuse are dealt with effectively not only in Wormwood Scrubs but also in other prisons.

Background

The evidence of the abuse, including torture and ill-treatment, was initially collected and compiled by one law firm, Hickman and Rose. The accounts given to the lawyers reportedly described systematic low level physical and verbal abuse of inmates: prisoners described incidents of assault and abuse continuing regularly in the Segregation Unit. However, certain prisoners were targeted for repeated and vicious physical assaults, because of either the nature of their convictions, their ethnicity or their perceived "attitude". In some cases, the allegations amounted to claims of repeated acts of torture; one lawyer stated that there was evidence of torture in at least four cases he was aware of.

Prisoners alleged that they were assaulted during "squat" searches; frequently beaten or kicked; hosed down using a high pressure hose with cold water; locked naked in the shower room for hours; humiliatingly strip-searched; subjected to humiliating verbal abuse and racist abuse; and repeatedly slapped. Some prisoners alleged that prison officers fabricated charges against prisoners in order to get them placed in the Segregation Unit, where it was easier to beat prisoners. Furthermore prisoners alleged that when they did make complaints, they did not receive replies; one prisoner stated: "All in all over a year I complained to about five different governors both in person and in writing. I never received a response." In other cases, prison officers made counter-complaints and in such situations the prisoners would not be believed.

The law firm Hickman and Rose submitted a dossier to the Chief Inspector of Prisons on 16 March 1998 based on seven cases and added an eighth a day afterwards. On the basis of this evidence the Prison Service instituted an internal inquiry. On 31 March 1998 a police criminal investigation was launched. Amnesty International was informed that the police investigation was examining allegations made by approximately 40 inmates and former inmates of Wormwood Scrubs covering the period of October 1996 to March 1998. However, the organization was also informed that there may have been up to 50 other cases from the period of 1992 to 1996.

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