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**Statement by Pierre Sané
Secretary General, Amnesty International**

**USA Campaign Launch
Washington D.C., 6 October 1998**

(Check against delivery)

Today Amnesty International members all over the world are starting a campaign to improve human rights protection for all those who live on US soil. We are doing this at a time when the US political establishment is immersed on issues of morality in politics and society.

The concept of right and wrong is high in today's news agenda. This is the time, then, to address seriously long standing human wrongs in this country. To address the violation of the dignity of the voiceless. Of the prisoners subjected to inhuman treatment. Of the members of ethnic minorities brutalized by the police. Of the asylum seekers jailed like criminals.

Amnesty International has been knocking on the doors of Congress for the past 37 years. We have been telling the US authorities that cruelty does not just happen elsewhere. Serious human rights violations are not just a foreign affair. They are happening in the US today and -- worst of all -- some are on the increase.

And where is the public outcry? Where are the zealous defenders of morality when a mentally ill inmate is shackled to a four-point metal restraint board for 12 weeks? When a pregnant woman is shackled during her seven hours of labour?

Where is the public outcry at the shockingly cruel conditions in many of the nations's jails and prisons? Or at the New York Police department's 3 million dollar purchase of the right to kill Anthony Baez with impunity?

What we have in the US political establishment today is a clear case of hypocrisy and inconsistency.

The words of a refugee who was detained in harsh conditions for 14 months before being granted asylum painfully illustrates the situation: “Everyone says America is the place for human rights. I thought maybe I had arrived in the wrong country.”

A greater focus on the punishment rather than the rehabilitation of prisoners has led to cuts in programs and facilities in many US prisons. Prison authorities are turning to other ways of dealing with prisoners. Ways that are cruel, painful and often life threatening: supermaximum security units, electro-shock devices, chemical sprays, lethal injections.

Not all sectors of society are equally affected by this, however. This is a country where racial discrimination remained legal until the 1960s, underpinning a system where black people faced discrimination at work, at school and at the hands of the police and the criminal justice system.

In a country still struggling to eradicate racial discrimination, more than 60 per cent of prisoners come from racial minorities. Up to one third of all young black men in the US are in jail or prison, or on parole or probation.

You have all received copies of the one-hundred-and-fifty page report published for this campaign. The abuses it describes, should shock the conscience of people everywhere. It is one of several reports on human rights in the USA to be published this year, but only one of many produced by our organization in the past decade.

Since the report was completed, we have continued to receive information of disturbing cases from around the country: INS detainees in a Florida jail subjected to electroshocks, beatings, punitive solitary confinement and prolonged shackling. Use of restraint chairs in juvenile facilities in Maine. Sexual abuse of women in prison. Retaliation against those who dare to complain or denounce.

What Amnesty International is saying today, has been said many, many times before, and not only by us.

A large and very active NGO community in the USA has repeatedly raised its voice as well against the persistent pattern of police brutality, the endemic violence against prisoners, the punitive treatment of asylum seekers, the arbitrary, unfair and racist use of the death penalty.

As we speak, the State of Virginia is preparing to execute next week a young man who was just 17 at the time the offense was committed.

There is nothing new here. It has all been denounced again and again. And that is the reason for this campaign. Enough has been written and said.

In a perfect symbol of the current state of human rights in this country, juvenile justice measures are being proposed that would encourage the trial of 15-year-old children as adults. Many of these children could end up in adult prisons, where they could face the risk of being raped, tortured and murdered.

The truth is that many standards of human rights protection in the United States have not kept pace with evolving international standards of decency. The United States has one of the worst ratification records of all industrialized nations. Together with Somalia, the US is the only country in the world not to have ratified the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Even though the US government uses these same international standards to judge others, it fails to apply the same yard stick at home. It has campaigned vigorously to block the establishment of a truly effective and independent international criminal court. And it continues to fuel violations abroad by providing weapons and expertise to governments that deliberately violate the rights of their citizens.

Amnesty International can only welcome at the current soul searching on morality in politics. But unless this exercise addresses the central needs for the protection of the dignity of the weakest groups in society human rights in the USA will continue to be a tale of two nations: rich and poor, white and black, male and female.

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