

AI INDEX: EUR 45/15/97
8 AUGUST 1997

United Kingdom: Amnesty International Welcomes New Inquiry into Top Security Conditions

Amnesty International today welcomed the announcement that Sir David Ramsbotham, Chief Inspector of Prisons, is launching an inquiry into conditions in which top security inmates are imprisoned.

"Over the years, we have expressed concern about the conditions in which Category A prisoners -- i.e. those held on remand or convicted of serious offences, whose potential escape is considered to pose great danger -- are being held," Amnesty International said. "We are hopeful that this new inquiry will help bring top security prison conditions in the UK in line with internationally accepted standards."

In its most recent report on the subject, published in March this year, Amnesty International described the Special Security Units in which "exceptional [escape] risk" Category A prisoners are held as constituting "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment" and denying remand prisoners their right to a fair trial in violation of the United Kingdom's obligations under international treaties.

Category A prisoners are denied many of the basic rights recognized under international standards. The denial of basic rights is greatly exacerbated in Special Security Units, where prisoners are subjected to "small-group isolation", lack of adequate medical treatment, strip-searching, lack of natural daylight and long distance vision, a non-contact "closed" visit regime, and lack of adequate exercise, educational and work facilities.

"These conditions have led in some cases to serious physical and psychological disorders in prisoners and clearly violate international law," Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization repeated its concerns about the conditions in Special Security Units in a document published in June entitled *United Kingdom: An Agenda for Human Rights Protection*. In its documents, the organization asked the government to review security measures within the prison regime to ensure that such measures do not constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

In his response to the organization, Home Secretary Jack Straw stated that he did not believe that the security measures within the Special Security Units constitute cruel inhuman or degrading treatment. He stated that 8 of 9 recommendations of a report by Sir Donald Acheson (a former Government Medical Officer) about the units either endorsed existing policy or have since been implemented.

Amnesty International urges Sir David Ramsbotham to make recommendations which will:

- ensure that UK laws and practice, including the regime and conditions in Special Security Units are consistent with the full range of international and regional human rights standards;

- end closed (non-contact) visits, since they have seriously impeded remand prisoners' right to a fair trial, because they undermine the defendants' capacity to prepare their defence, restrict the facilities for the preparation of the prisoners' defence through "closed" legal visits, and jeopardize the maintenance of relationships between prisoners and their families;
- ensure compliance with the provisions of the European Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons, and approve further transfers of prisoners from England to Ireland or Northern Ireland, so that prisoners can serve their sentences closer to their families;
- seek alternatives to the use of "small-group isolation" as a regular form of imprisonment;
- ensure that prisoners are not held in conditions which violate their rights to a fair trial;
- ensure that prisoners and their counsel have input into regular reviews of their security categorization.

Amnesty International also urges the UK government to make publicly available the report of Sir Donald Acheson which, though published in the House of Commons Library, is only available to Members of Parliament.

Background

Category A prisoners are divided into three sub-categories: standard risk, high risk and exceptional risk. Both unconvicted Category A prisoners held on remand prior to their trials and convicted prisoners, who have been classified by the Prison Service as "exceptional risk", are detained in "prisons within prisons" known as Special Security Units or SSUs in the UK. SSU's in Whitemoor Prison and Full Sutton Prison house "exceptional risk" Category A prisoners who have been convicted. Remand prisoners who have been classified as "exceptional risk" Category A prisoners are held in an SSU at Belmarsh prison. As of February 1997, there were about 25 prisoners held in these SSUs in the UK; approximately one half of them are Irish.
ENDS.../

For further information or to obtain copies of the reports *United Kingdom: Special Security Units: Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment* (AI Index: EUR 45/06/97), and *United Kingdom: An Agenda for Human Rights Protection* (AI Index: EUR 45/12/97), please phone Amnesty International's press office on +44 171 413 5562 or 0468 670 248.