

AI INDEX: ASA 30/04/95

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MONGOLIA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNS PRISON STARVATION DEATHS

Prisoners in Mongolia are dying of starvation due to gross neglect and sometimes deliberate abuse, says Amnesty International in a report issued today.

"Many of those who die are already starving when they come from pre-trial custody. The Mongolian Government has admitted to cases where prisoners have been deliberately starved in pre-trial custody to force confessions from them," says Amnesty International.

According to the authorities this is not a deliberate policy but results from misconduct by individual law enforcement officers who are punished when found out.

Ninety people died in Mongolian prisons between late 1993 and late 1994, according to official statistics, and Mongolian authorities say that up to a third of these deaths were caused directly by starvation.

But according to Amnesty International the true number of deaths from starvation may be higher -- lack of food may be contributing to weakened resistance to illnesses which prove fatal. Overcrowding, bad sanitation and shortages of clothing, drinking water and medical supplies are also contributing to illness and possibly death among prisoners.

The organization said that prisoners are starving because their rations are inadequate. People serving custodial sentences are required by law to work to pay for their food, but the prison administrations are no longer able to guarantee work for prisoners. Where prisoners cannot work they cannot eat. Amnesty International has gathered reports of desperate behaviour by starving prisoners, including eating scraps from the prison garbage and killing and eating stray cats and dogs.

In a campaign launched today Amnesty International is calling on the Mongolian authorities to amend the law which links prisoners' labour and the provision of food, and to provide all prisoners with adequate food and medical care. The organization is making a number of recommendations aimed at safeguarding detainees against inhumane practices such as deliberate starvation. Amnesty International is also seeking to alert international humanitarian aid and penal reform organizations to the problem of Mongolian prison conditions and encouraging them to intervene.

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