

Advice to editors

20 September 1991

**USA-**  
**SUMMARY OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S CONCERNS**

**DEATH PENALTY**

In the USA, one of the most pressing human rights issues Amnesty International is campaigning on is the continuing use of the death penalty. Amnesty International opposes the execution of any prisoner, as the ultimate violation of the right to life.

Contrary to the worldwide trend towards the abolition of executions, more than two-thirds of US states still mete out death sentences and the country is one of only six in the world that are known still to execute juvenile offenders.

The US Supreme Court ruled in 1989 that offenders as young as 16 and mentally retarded offenders are not necessarily exempt from execution; in May 1990 a black, borderline mentally retarded juvenile offender, Dalton Prejean, was sent to the electric chair in Louisiana.

Last year 23 prisoners were executed, bringing the number of executions since 1977 to 143. More than 2,300 prisoners are still on death row in the USA. There have been 11 executions so far this year.

Studies indicate that the penalty is used in a racially discriminatory way in the USA, where those who murder white victims are several times more likely to receive the death penalty than those who kill black victims at a similar level of aggravation. A large number of black defendants accused of the murder of white victims have been sentenced to death by all-white juries.

**FAIR TRIAL**

Amnesty International also works for fair trials for political prisoners. In past years in the USA the organization has investigated a number of criminal cases where the defendants have alleged that their prosecutions were politically motivated.

Those trials have included cases where people have been convicted possibly because of racial discrimination or their political activities.

**ILL-TREATMENT IN PRISONS AND POLICE STATIONS**

Last year, Amnesty International reported allegations of systemic ill-treatment by police in Chicago during a 12-year period from 1972-1984. The suspects alleged that they had been beaten, kicked, subjected to electric shocks, had guns placed in their mouths or had plastic bags placed over their heads.

Amnesty International has written to state officials expressing concern about the apparent inadequacies of investigations into these allegations and urging Chicago authorities to hold a full inquiry. An inquiry into those allegations is currently underway by the police department's Office of Professional Standards, and Amnesty International will study the results when they are made public.

Amnesty International has in recent years investigated complaints that prisoners had been ill-treated or kept in cruel, inhuman and degrading conditions in prisons in a number of states, including Texas, Ohio Kentucky and Illinois among others.

**PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE**

Amnesty International believes that everyone has the right to object on conscientious grounds to taking part in military service, even people who have voluntarily enlisted, and the organization presses for the release of people who are imprisoned for these reasons.

In the USA, some 25 armed forces personnel who have been imprisoned over the past nine months on charges stemming from their refusal on conscientious grounds to participate in military service related to the Gulf war have been taken up by the organization as prisoners of conscience

**Amnesty International has urged the immediate and unconditional release of all these prisoners of conscience - who are people imprisoned solely because of the non-violent expression of their beliefs.**

### **REFUGEES**

**Amnesty International believes that no one should be sent back to a country where they are at risk of serious human rights violations, such as being imprisoned as a prisoner of conscience, tortured, "disappeared" or executed.**

**To ensure that doesn't happen, all governments must make sure that people seeking asylum receive, among other things, a thorough examination of their asylum request and have a chance to appeal any refusal to grant asylum.**

**Last year Amnesty International published a report showing that the pattern of asylum applications accepted and refused in the USA indicates a clear bias against people from some countries particularly Guatemala, El Salvador and Haiti and urged the authorities to apply impartially one standard of asylum evaluation to all foreign nationals. Since then, a court-approved settlement has granted many Salvadorans and Guatemalans the opportunity to re-apply for asylum under new regulations, which offer hope that the bias against certain nationalities will diminish.**

**The organization has also been concerned about various detention practices that have been used to deter asylum seekers from filing or pursuing their asylum claims.**

**For further information on Amnesty International's concerns in the USA please contact:**

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**Death Penalty Issues - ANUSA Death Penalty Office New York 212-807-8400**