

**NEWS RELEASE**

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**USA:**

**POLICE BRUTALITY IN LOS ANGELES**  
**UNCHECKED PROBLEM FOR YEARS**

Amnesty International's Secretary General criticizes USA record  
on police brutality, asylum-seekers, and death penalty

Police in the Los Angeles area have for years been guilty of using excessive force - mostly in black and latino neighbourhoods - leading at times to serious injuries or death, Amnesty International said today.

"The record on police brutality is appalling," Amnesty International's Secretary General Ian Martin said. "It is one of a number of current human rights scandals in the US that undermine its credibility in promoting rights internationally."

In releasing a new report in Los Angeles today, Mr Martin said police brutality in the area has gone unchecked for many years, with officers feeling free to act without fear of discipline or prosecution.

One of the striking findings of Amnesty International's investigation is that suspects have been shot even though they posed no immediate threat of death, and police dogs appear to have been used to inflict unwarranted injury on suspects, particularly in black and latino neighbourhoods.

"The evidence, in fact, suggests that blacks and latinos bear the brunt of police brutality in the Los Angeles area," Mr Martin said.

The report covering some 40 cases shows that officers in the Los Angeles Police Department and the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department regularly seem to use higher levels of force than allowed in their guidelines, often out of all proportion to the threat posed by the victims.

Mr Martin said the excessive force -- which includes kicks, punches, and beatings with batons, flashlights and lead-filled straps called "saps" -- has at times amounted to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Often it has led to serious injuries or death.

While recognizing the dangers facing the police in Los Angeles, where gang-related murders number in the hundreds, Mr Martin said that such violence can never justify a pattern of police brutality that has persisted for years.

In a speech about the USA's human rights record delivered at the annual general meeting of Amnesty International's US membership, Mr Martin said the US actions in three major areas of rights abuse -- police brutality, the Haitian refugee crisis and the death penalty -- jeopardize rights protection around the world.

"They are an affront to human rights and to all those in the US and elsewhere who work for human rights," Mr Martin said. The US government holds itself up to the rest of the world as an advocate of human rights, yet fails to protect some of those very rights itself, he said.

Since the coup in Haiti last September, the US government has sent back thousands of asylum seekers fearing arrest, torture or death -- in violation of its international obligations.

At first the government only gave them cursory screenings on board Coast Guard ships or a more substantial but still inadequate screening at a US naval base. Since then, they have been turning large numbers of Haitians back without any screening at all. So far, 14,000 Haitians have been sent back to a country where grave human rights violations continue to be reported.

This underscores the double standard applied by the US government, which in 1989 rightly criticized the flawed refugee screening process in Hong Kong and the British proposal to forcibly return "screened out" asylum seekers.

"The scandal of the US policy of turning possible refugees away is not only that this is being done, but that it is being done by the richest and most powerful nation on earth," Mr Martin said.

"What does this example say to the poorer nations whose people are asked to help most of the world's 17 million refugees camped on their doorsteps?"

The USA is also out of step with the international trend towards abolishing the death penalty, Mr Martin said, and stands almost alone in the world in allowing the execution of juvenile offenders.

US authorities are not only continuing to kill their own citizens, but they are killing more of them and they appear to want to do so faster than before by cutting down on the appeals processes.

"The US today is isolated by its use of the death penalty from its European allies. No country in the Council of Europe, no other NATO country, has carried out a single execution since the last executions in Turkey in 1984," Mr Martin said. "In Eastern Europe a growing number of countries, including Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania, have abolished the death penalty, a step which is recognized as an essential part of respect for human rights."

In the USA, more people have been executed in the first half of 1992 than in the whole of last year and there are more prisoners on death row than at any time in US history - 2,588 as of April. States that haven't executed people for a quarter of a century have opened up their execution chambers again. And racial discrimination is still apparent in the way death sentences are handed down.

The death penalty debacles witnessed this year also underscore the inherent cruelty of the punishment, with one man having four stays of execution granted and then overturned in the hours leading up to his execution and another given a lie detector test 12 hours before his execution.

"The moral authority of the US as an international advocate of human rights protection is seriously undermined by the determination in many US states to continue to kill people who kill people to show that killing people is wrong."