

**USA (Colorado) Inmates at La Plata County Jail, Durango**

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Amnesty International is concerned by allegations of the punitive, and possibly dangerous, use of restraints in La Plata County Jail, Durango, Colorado, in violation of international standards on restraints and of the international ban on cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

In recent months, inmates at La Plata jail have allegedly been punished by being handcuffed to rings set in a wall of the jail, or to rings in the wall or floor of the isolation cell. Such punitive use of restraints, for a "standard" duration of six hours, has allegedly been used for minor rule infringements, including "refusing to pick up his meal tray"; using the intercom "for non-emergency use"; and rule infractions concerning clothing.

Inmates have allegedly also been held face down on the floor of an isolation cell in four-point restraint, that is, by having their ankles and wrists secured by leg irons and handcuffs to the floor and wall rings. It is alleged that this method, too, has been used as punishment rather than as a legitimate control technique (see background). Concern for inmates' welfare has been heightened by the reported inadequacy of the jail's written policy in this area. It is said not to require the involvement and supervision of medical personnel when restraints are used, and fails to ensure the appropriate documentation of incidents.

Amnesty International is particularly disturbed that in at least one incident, a stun gun was used to electro-shock an inmate who was already handcuffed to a wall. The officer's report of this incident reportedly admits that the shock was delivered because the inmate "continued to taunt and be verbally aggressive". The organization is concerned that when the prisoner filed a complaint, the investigating officer allegedly responded that the use of the stun gun in this way had been an act of "calm professionalism". Amnesty International believes that such a response can only encourage misuse of electro-shock weapons in the jail.

In addition, La Plata Jail has recently acquired a restraint chair, a device used to immobilize an inmate by securing both arms and legs, and which has straps that can be tightened across the shoulders and chest. Whilst this chair has been promoted in the USA as a safer form of four-point restraint (because the inmate remains in an upright sitting position), there have been several cases of torture or ill-treatment of prisoners restrained in such chairs (see *Rights for All*, AMR 51/35/98, October 1998, pages 67-70). Any use of such restraints must be the subject of clear, strict guidelines, including as regards medical supervision, monitoring and documentation. La Plata County Jail is reported to have no written policy concerning the use of its restraint chair. It is alleged that at least one inmate has been strapped to the chair without it being documented in a written report.

Most inmates in La Plata jail are either awaiting trial, or are serving sentences of under a year.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners states that "[i]nstruments of restraint, such as handcuffs, chains, irons and strait-jackets, shall never be applied as a punishment. Furthermore, chains

or irons shall not be used as restraints." US law does not bar the use of chains or leg-irons.

Amnesty International believes that four-point restraint should only be used when strictly necessary, for example as a short-term emergency measure to prevent damage or injury, and in accordance with international standards.

The organization believes that electro-shock stun weapons, widely used in the USA, are inherently open to abuse, given their capacity to inflict severe pain at the touch of a button, usually without leaving marks. Amnesty International is concerned by evidence suggesting that such weapons may be potentially life-threatening if used against people with pre-existing heart or other serious medical problems. It believes that all such weapons should be suspended pending a full and rigorous inquiry into their uses and effects (see *Cruelty in Control? The Stun Belt and other Electro-shock equipment in Law Enforcement*, AMR 51/54/99, June 1999).

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send faxes/express/airmail letters in your own words, in English or your own language:**

- expressing concern at the alleged punitive use of restraints against inmates in La Plata County Jail, including for minor rule infractions, in circumstances which constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, prohibited by international standards to which the USA is a party;
- noting that international standards expressly prohibit the use of restraints as punishment;
- expressing particular concern at the alleged use of (1) an electro-shock stun gun against an already shackled inmate, and (2) the use of four-point restraint in the apparent absence of clear guidelines on its use;
- calling for a full independent investigation into the use of all forms of restraint at La Plata County Jail, and for clear, strict policies on the appropriate use of restraints to be written down, including a requirement for medical supervision, monitoring and documentation of all incidents;
- urging that the use of electro-shock stun weapons at the jail be suspended pending a wider inquiry into their uses and effects.

**APPEALS TO:**

Sheriff Duke Schirard  
 La Plata County Sheriff's Office  
 742 Turner Drive, Durango, CO 81301, USA  
**Faxes: + 1 970 247 1618**  
**E-mails: tebrinkbf@co.laplata.co.us**  
**Salutation: Dear Sheriff**

Board of County Commissioners  
 County of La Plata  
 1060 East 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, Durango, CO 81301, USA  
**Faxes: + 1 970 382 6299**  
**Salutation: Dear County Commissioners**

(There are three elected officials on the Board of County Commissioners, which is the governing body of La Plata County: Fred W. Klatt, III; Bob Lieb; Frank Joswick. You may write to them individually if you wish).

**COPIES TO:** diplomatic representatives of the USA accredited to your country.

You may also write brief letters of concern (not more than 250 words) to:  
Letters to the Editor, *Durango Herald*, 1275 Main Avenue, Durango, CO 81301,  
USA   **Faxes: + 1 970 259 5011   E-mails: [letters@durangoherald.com](mailto:letters@durangoherald.com)**

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat,  
or your section office, if sending appeals after 30 January 2000.