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Amnesty International Launches Report on Australian Deaths in Custody

As Australian Government officials prepare for a ministerial summit meeting on deaths in custody on 4 July, Amnesty International is today launching a major report highlighting the continuing high levels of Aboriginal deaths in custody.

“As Australia approaches the end of a five-year period for which special programs were initiated in July 1992 to combat deaths in custody, it should not turn its back on at least 85 Aborigines who have died in the custody of police and prison officers since then,” Amnesty International said today.

“Five years after many concerned Australians and a Royal Commission prompted government commitments to address the problem, the annual custodial death toll of Aboriginal people continues unabated.”

- * Nineteen of the 75 people recorded by the government as having died in custody-related circumstances during the 12 months to 30 June 1996 were Aboriginal -- a 46 per cent increase over the previous year.
- * Although Aborigines represent only 1.4 per cent of the adult population, they accounted for more than 25 per cent of all deaths in police and prison custody during the year to June 1996.
- * In the prison system, Aborigines accounted for 18.5 per cent of all prisoners but 39 per cent of all those who died in prisons during the 12 months to June 1996.

Although many welcome initiatives have been taken since the 1980s towards improving the standards of care and addressing other underlying factors contributing to high Aboriginal death in custody levels, the problem has merely shifted from police to prison custody.

In its report Amnesty International examines trends in custodial deaths since the Royal Commission -- including major causes and circumstances of deaths -- and makes recommendations for their prevention. The report highlights some of the continuing systemic deficiencies in the standard of care which contributed to the deaths, as well as problems with the independence and thoroughness of post-death investigations.

“Many deaths could have been prevented if existing procedures had been adhered to, and if data on the suicide risk, health and welfare of prisoners had been properly assessed and brought to the attention of relevant police and prison officers as well as medical staff,” Amnesty International said.

The human rights organization believes that there should be coronial post-death investigations into all deaths in custody. As well as serving to identify the cause of death in individual cases such investigations could highlight systemic deficiencies in the quality of care.

“The summit meeting offers an important and unique opportunity to initiate more effective reforms and to help rebuild trust among the general public, particularly among Aboriginal people, that the government is serious in its stated commitment to make deaths in custody a high priority,” Amnesty International said.

For further information please consult the full report *AUSTRALIA Deaths in custody: how many more?* (AI Index: ASA 12/04/97).

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