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US authorities urged to end two men's 40 year-long solitary imprisonment

Authorities in Louisiana must immediately remove two inmates from isolation conditions imposed on them four decades ago, said Amnesty International today as it prepared to hand over a 65,000-signature petition to Governor Jindal demanding action.

On 17 April 1972, Albert Woodfox, 65, and Herman Wallace, 70, were placed in an isolation unit in Louisiana State Penitentiary - known as Angola Prison. They were charged, and later convicted of, the murder of a prison guard – something they have consistently denied.

Apart from very brief periods, they have been held in isolation ever since.

"The 40-year isolated incarceration of these two men is scandalous," said Everette Harvey Thompson, Southern Office Regional Director of Amnesty International USA.

"It pushes the boundaries of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, and flies in the face of international standards to which the US is a party."

Woodfox and Wallace are confined to their 2m x 3m cells for 23 hours a day and allowed out only to exercise alone in a small outdoor cage, or to shower or walk along the cell unit corridor.

They have limited access to books, newspapers and television. For the past four decades they have not been allowed to work or have access to education. Social interaction has been restricted to occasional visits from friends and family and limited telephone calls.

They have also been denied any meaningful review of the reasons for their isolation.

"What evidence is there that these men are so dangerous that they must be subjected to these conditions? They have clean disciplinary histories, they are old men and four decades of solitary confinement has left them physically and mentally frail," said Everette Harvey Thompson.

"There is no legitimate penal purpose for keeping these men in solitary. Louisiana authorities must end this inhumanity."

The men's lawyers have told Amnesty International that both are suffering from serious health problems caused or exacerbated by their years of solitary confinement.

Amnesty International has also raised questions about legal aspects of the case against them.

No physical evidence linking the men to the guard's murder has ever been found, while potentially exculpatory DNA evidence has been lost.

The convictions were also based on questionable inmate testimony.

Over the years of litigation, documents have emerged suggesting that the main eyewitness was bribed by prison officials into giving statements against the men and that the state withheld evidence about the perjured testimony of another inmate witness. A further witness later retracted his testimony.

NOTE TO EDITORS

On 17 April 2012, human rights activists will hand over more than 65,000 signatures from people around the world, calling on Governor Jindal to release Albert Woodfox and Herman Wallace from conditions of isolated confinement.

Speakers at the event will include Everette Harvey Thompson, Director of Amnesty International Southern Regional office, Robert King, only free member of the Angola 3, Alfreda Tillman Bester, General Counsel to the Louisiana State Conference of the NAACP, and Angola 3 family and friends

Photo opportunities will be available.

For more information on this case please see:

“USA: 100 years in solitary: ‘The Angola 3’ and their fight for justice”

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR51/041/2011/en>

A short video on the story of the "Angola 2", which includes an interview with Robert King, who spent 29 years in solitary confinement in the same prison is available on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kotf68mrqCI>