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USA: After decades in isolation, time to release Albert Woodfox

Forty two years ago today, Albert Woodfox was placed in an isolation cell in a Louisiana prison on suspicion of murdering a prison guard. He remains there today. While his solitary confinement has remained unchanged over four decades, during the last 14 months Albert Woodfox has again lived with hope on hold, after the state appealed the latest court ruling overturning his conviction.

In February 2013, a federal judge ruled that Albert Woodfox's conviction for the murder of the guard should be overturned due to a finding of racial discrimination in the selection of his grand jury foreperson. This was the third time a court has ruled to overturn his conviction.

The state of Louisiana immediately appealed this 2013 ruling and a decision from the Court of Appeals is expected soon.

Albert Woodfox has been held in solitary confinement for longer than virtually any other prisoner in the USA. He is confined alone for 23 hours a day in a small cell, and allowed out for only five hours a week for solitary exercise or showers. He has had no opportunities for meaningful social interaction, nor rehabilitation programmes.

In the past year, conditions worsened for Albert Woodfox as the state subjected him to strip searches each time he left or entered his cell. A court ruled in January 2014 that the prison should discontinue this humiliating practice. These conditions amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment and violate international human rights law and standards.

During the decades in solitary confinement, Albert Woodfox has not been afforded any meaningful review by the Louisiana authorities as to why he should continue to be held in such cruel conditions of isolation. He has not committed any serious disciplinary infractions for decades, and prison records indicate that he does not pose a threat to himself, others, or the institution.

Amnesty International's concerns about this case go beyond the inhumane conditions of confinement to which Albert Woodfox has been subjected since 1972, but also the serious legal flaws that have emerged over the decades of litigation in his case and remain without resolution.

There is no physical evidence to link Albert Woodfox to the crime he is accused; the only eyewitness to the crime was rewarded by the State for his testimony; testimony from other witnesses gave conflicting account of the crime – and much of it was subsequently retracted; the State suppressed exculpatory evidence and Albert Woodfox received ineffective assistance of counsel at both his trials.

Amnesty International considers that given these circumstances, the only remedy for Albert Woodfox

is his immediate release from prison.