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USA: Conditions must be improved at Tamms Correctional Center in Illinois

Amnesty International is calling for measures to improve conditions at Tamms Correctional Center, Illinois – the state’s only super-maximum security facility – stating that the harsh conditions of isolation endured by many prisoners for years on end appear to be unnecessarily punitive and may breach international standards for humane treatment.

The organization welcomes a bill currently before the state legislature (HB2633) which would bar seriously mentally ill prisoners from being sent to Tamms and provide for a fairer review process, stating that it is concerned that many prisoners are sent to the facility and remain there for years without being fully informed of the reasons. The bill also provides that prisoners will not remain at Tamms for more than one year, unless transferring them to another facility would endanger the safety of staff or other prisoners.

According to Amnesty International's information, prisoners at Tamms are confined alone for 23 or 24 hours a day in sparsely equipped concrete cells, with no work or group educational or recreational programs. All meals are taken in the cells. Prisoners exercise alone for a maximum of 5-7 hours a week in a high-walled, bare, partially-covered yard with no view apart from a small section of sky. The cell doors are made of heavy gauge perforated steel and are difficult to see through, compounding the sense of isolation. The narrow horizontal windows in each cell are positioned too high to see outside, unless the prisoner stands on his bed.

Contact with the outside world is also severely restricted, with prisoners denied phone calls and allowed only non-contact visits, conducted through a thick glass screen and intercom system. Prisoners are chained to the floor during visits and some have their wrists shackled together, allowing little movement. Despite the stringent security measures, prisoners are reportedly subjected to strip searches, including body cavity searches, before and after each visit. Because of the conditions imposed, and the remote location of the facility, many prisoners reportedly receive visits only rarely.

The prison was designed to house inmates considered too disruptive or dangerous to remain in the state’s general prison population, while providing a means by which prisoners could move back to less restrictive facilities if their behaviour improved. However, Amnesty International is concerned by the reported secrecy and lack of transparency in current procedures for transferring prisoners to and from Tamms, and the absence of any external oversight of such decisions. According to prison monitoring bodies, many prisoners are unaware of why they have been denied requests to transfer out of Tamms. More than 80 prisoners (around a third of the total) are believed to have been held in the facility for at least ten years, many since it opened in 1998, without any reasonable means of gaining release from their indefinite solitary confinement.

Some prisoners have alleged that they were transferred to the prison in retaliation for filing repeated complaints about their treatment. Others reportedly remain in the prison for failing to renounce alleged gang affiliations which they state would put themselves or their families in

danger; others claim they were erroneously assigned gang member status but the internal review process does not allow them to challenge this effectively.

Amnesty International is also concerned by reports that a significant number of prisoners currently housed in Tamms suffer from mental illness or psychological problems which are exacerbated by the harsh conditions of isolation. Prisoners have been described as engaging in disturbed behaviours such as self-mutilation, smearing faeces on cell surfaces, throwing bodily liquids or howling. It is alleged that seriously mentally ill prisoners, or those with histories of mental illness, have been sent to Tamms despite regulations which allow for the exclusion of such individuals from the facility.

There is a significant body of evidence in the USA and elsewhere that prolonged isolation can cause serious psychological and physical harm, particularly if accompanied by other deprivations such as lack of external stimuli, confinement to an enclosed space and inadequate exercise. Such conditions can have a severe impact on individuals with no pre-existing health problems, and may cause particular harm and suffering in the case of those who are already mentally ill.

Amnesty International recognizes that it may sometimes be necessary to segregate prisoners for disciplinary or security purposes. However, it is concerned that the current conditions at Tamms, taken cumulatively and applied over a prolonged period, are incompatible with the USA's obligations to provide humane treatment for all prisoners.

The USA has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 10 of which requires that "all persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and respect for the inherent dignity of the human person". The Human Rights Committee (the treaty monitoring body) has further emphasized that the absolute prohibition of torture or cruel inhuman or degrading treatment under international law "relates not only to acts that cause physical pain but also to acts that cause mental suffering" and has stated that prolonged solitary confinement may amount to torture or other ill-treatment. Both the Human Rights Committee and the United Nations (UN) Committee against Torture have criticized the excessively harsh conditions of isolation in some US supermax facilities.

Amnesty International believes that Bill HB2633, if enacted, would be an important step to providing fairer standards, accountability and oversight of the operation of Tamms. The organization is also urging the authorities to alleviate conditions for all prisoners who remain at the facility, including improving the exercise facilities, reviewing visitation conditions and providing some opportunity to participate in rehabilitation programs.

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