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USA: Amnesty International on a fact-finding visit to Wisconsin

An Amnesty International delegation will meet with Wisconsin officials to discuss the organization's concerns regarding conditions at the state's "supermaximum security" prison in Boscobel

The Amnesty International delegates will be in Wisconsin between 29 May and 1 June and will be meeting with the Warden of Boscobel, Gerald Berge, and others. The delegation will include a senior staff member of the organization's International Secretariat and Professor Roy King, a UK criminologist who has inspected prisons in many different countries and acts as an advisor to the UK Home Office on high security units.

Amnesty International welcomes the Warden's willingness to meet with the organization. However, the authorities have so far refused to grant Amnesty International permission to tour the facility, although the organization has recently renewed its request. Amnesty International believes that a facility where prisoners are held in conditions of extreme isolation should be open to outside scrutiny from concerned groups.

The human rights organization has received disturbing reports about conditions under which prisoners -- reportedly the state's most violent or disruptive inmates -- are housed. Complaints include prisoners, some of them mentally ill, being:

! held 24 hours a day in solitary, sparsely furnished cells with no view to the outside;

! allowed exercise only for one hour four times a week in a concrete cage;

! made to have lights on constantly and being woken up at night at hourly intervals;

! subject to constant exposure through surveillance cameras. Guards, including female staff, are able to watch prisoners showering, undressing, urinating and defecating;

! allowed visits with family only through video screen with poor visibility.

Background:

Wisconsin is one of 38 US states to build "supermaximum security" prisons in recent years. "Supermax" facilities place emphasis on security and control rather than rehabilitation, with prisoners typically confined to isolation cells for 23 hours or more a day, with no work or vocational programs.

The Supermax Correctional Institution (SMCI) at Boscobel opened in late 1999 and houses 350 prisoners. It is the state's most secure correctional facility and is designed to house prisoners who are, in the department's words: "The most violent and difficult inmates under Department of Correction Supervision".

However, it is claimed that prisoners who do not merit a high security rating have been moved there. A lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union and local attorneys last year alleged that the conditions at SMCI constitute cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the US constitution. The lawsuit is currently pending court proceedings.

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