

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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USA: Amnesty International deeply disturbed by apparent impunity for guards in Frank Valdes killing

Amnesty International is deeply disturbed by the dropping of charges against five remaining prison guards awaiting trial for the 1999 killing of Florida death row inmate Frank Valdes.

Florida state prosecutors' decision last Friday to drop the charges -- which ranged from conspiracy to second-degree murder -- followed a jury's acquittal of three other former correctional officers charged in the same case in February.

Amnesty International said it was appalled that no-one has been brought to justice or held accountable in the case, despite overwhelming evidence that Valdes was beaten to death by guards in an isolation cell in Florida State Prison in July 1999. Valdes, who was serving a sentence for the murder of a prison guard, died from massive injuries inflicted during the alleged beating. Injuries included 22 broken ribs and a fractured sternum, nose and jaw, and there were boot marks on his face, neck, abdomen and back.

Amnesty International expressed concern that the safety of all those in state custody is in jeopardy if officers can act with impunity in the face of such compelling and horrendous evidence of abuse. The organization also called on the federal Justice Department -- which announced it would review the Valdes case after the February acquittals -- to make every effort to bring those responsible to justice.

Background

The charges in the killing of Frank Valdes stemmed from two incidents in X-Wing (a high security isolation wing) of Florida State Prison: a "cell extraction" in which Valdes was injured while being forcibly removed from his cell by five guards, and the alleged fatal beating which took place when he returned to his cell from the prison clinic on 17 July 1999.

At the trial, the prosecution contended that Frank Valdes was beaten by guards to discourage him from going to the media with allegations of physical abuse of other inmates in X-Wing. Allegations of systematic beatings by guards of inmates in X-Wing came to light after Valdes' death when inmates contacted a local newspaper. However, a state jury -- drawn from a community with strong ties to the state prison system -- acquitted all three officers tried last February.

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