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## **USA: Independent investigation into deaths at California prison urgently needed**

*The recent deaths of seven women prisoners in a California prison points to the pressing need for independent scrutiny of medical care, Amnesty International said today as it called for an independent investigation into the deaths.*

*"For several years we have received complaints about the inadequacy of medical care -- and delays in treatment -- in women's prisons in California," the organization stressed. "What is particularly alarming now is that these deaths have come just weeks after state legislative hearings raised concerns about medical neglect in these facilities."*

*In just over a month, seven women have died at the Central California Women's Facility in Chowchilla. Local prison groups who have visited the prison have blamed slow and shoddy medical care for at least some of deaths. They have also argued that the use of guards as medical personnel conflicts with their custodial role. Inmates have reported, for example, that the prison's medical technical assistants (MTAs) -- guards who serve as the first line of prison health care -- disregarded the complaints of inmate, Pamela Coffey, less than an hour before her death.*

*The Californian authorities have, however, maintained that medical practices, which were the target of a class-action lawsuit over inadequate medical care, have improved considerably.*

*"What is clear is that there continues to be serious questions about the delivery of health care and the ability of the MTAs to respond in crisis situations," Amnesty International maintained. "The time has come*

for medical standards to be independently -- and regularly -- monitored."

Amnesty International is also calling on Senator Richard Palanco, who presided over the Californian legislative hearings, to re-convene and commission an expert's report.

### **Background**

The Central California Women's Facility serves as a hospital and hospice for women throughout the Californian state prison system. There have been 15 deaths at the prison this year; nine in 1999 and 10 in 1998.

Four of the women who died in the past month were apparently suffering from terminal illnesses, but two of these women were reportedly not given prompt attention after they began suffering severe health problems. The Californian prison authorities have announced an internal investigation into three of the deaths within a one-month period.

In 1999 Amnesty International raised concerns about medical treatment -- including the denial of adequate medical care and the need for independent monitoring -- in two women's prisons in California.

For more information please see Amnesty International reports: "Not part of my sentence" Violations of the Human Rights of Women in Custody, March 1999, and A visit to Valley State Prison, California, April 1999

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or call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566  
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>