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AUSTRALIA: RECORD NUMBER OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN DEATHS IN CUSTODY

Today's apparent suicide in a Brisbane prison cell of a 17-year-old Aboriginal youth pushed to a record high the number of indigenous people who died in custody or during police operations in Australia during any year in the last eight years, Amnesty International said today.

Maurice Roland Fisher was found hanging from a bed sheet tied to a window in his cell early on Friday, 8 December 1995. He had been on remand since August and had not been assessed as having a suicide risk.

Mr Fisher's Aboriginal cellmate reportedly slept through the apparent suicide in the young offenders unit of the Sir David Longland Correctional Centre in Brisbane where at least five prisoners, including two Aboriginals, have died this year. The cellmate was awoken by prison staff who discovered Mr Fisher's body during routine cell checks.

"This latest death should set off the alarm bells for the Australian people," Amnesty International said. "Aborigines suffer appallingly high levels of arrest, incarceration and deaths in jails and police operations because of the way the criminal justice system works in Australia."

Despite all efforts to stress the importance of adequate government response to this issue, at least 16 indigenous people, including one Maori, have died in Australian prison or police custody so far this year, more than at any time since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was established in 1987. Six out of 15 Aboriginal cell deaths occurred in South Australian prisons alone in 1995.

Nationwide this year, at least a further four Aborigines and one Maori reportedly died in the course of police operations, including high-speed car pursuits, Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is therefore calling for thorough and fully independent inquiries into the death of Maurice Roland Fisher and into all other deaths in custody, including deaths in police operations. The human rights organization urges the Australian authorities to ensure full and continuous implementation of accepted recommendations by the Royal Commission and to hasten progress where such recommendations have not yet been fully implemented.

Since 1992, the vast majority of recommendations made by the Royal Commission aimed at reducing the unacceptably high rate of such deaths were adopted for implementation by the Australian federal and state governments.

In February 1993, Amnesty International issued a report on the extremely disproportionate levels of incarceration and criminalization of Aboriginal people. These have been found to be inextricably linked to the high rate of indigenous custodial deaths.

A year ago this week [Monday, 5 December 1994] a House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs tabled a report on the implementation by governments of Royal Commission recommendations. The report found that any progress made in implementing recommendations was not reflected in key criminal justice statistics.

Although all Australian governments have committed themselves to use imprisonment only as a last resort, the Australian Institute of Criminology recorded a 51 per cent increase in the number of Aboriginal prisoners over the past six years up to 30 June 1994.

Amnesty International also expressed concern at an increase over recent years in the number of non-indigenous people who die in Australian police or prison custody.

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