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Japan: Prisoners face cruel and humiliating punishment

As the United Nations and non-governmental organizations today called on governments around the world to eradicate torture, Amnesty International launched a new report on cruel and abusive punishments in Japanese prisons.

“Prisoners have been shackled in leather and metal handcuffs, violently attacked by guards, and forced to eat like dogs as a punishment for minor infractions of secret prison rules,” said Mark Allison of Amnesty International’s East Asia Team at a press conference in Tokyo today.

“As a major political and economic power in the region, Japan should be taking a lead in promoting human rights. Yet by failing to reform the tight disciplinary regime in its prisons, the Japanese government remains in breach of international human rights standards,” he said.

In its report, the human rights organisation documents a number of recent cases where prison guards have inflicted severe physical and mental punishment on prisoners for breaking prison rules. Prisoners have been shackled in leather belts and handcuffs and put in so-called “protection cells” for days on end, often for little more than “answering back” to prison guards. The handcuffs are not removed, even at mealtimes or when the prisoner needs to use the toilet. Prisoners are treated more like animals than as human beings.

Some have died while being held in such conditions. Amnesty’s new report documents a recent case where a man died after suffering a heatstroke while being held in a body belt and handcuffs for several hours in a poorly ventilated “protection cell” during the height of summer.

Just as worrying are the growing number of reports of violence by prison guards. A prisoner in Fuchu Prison is currently suing the government after guards stamped on his back and tightened the body belt so hard that he could hardly breathe. This caused internal bleeding and numbness in his toes. Another prisoner in Niigata Prison was kicked all over his body and in his face by prison guards. He was then held in handcuffs and a body belt for eight days in a “protection cell”.

Prisoners may also be punished psychologically. “We have received many reports of prisoners being punished with solitary confinement for periods of up to two months. During this period, they must kneel in the same position all day and stare at a fixed point on the wall. They have no exercise or mental stimulation. It’s inhuman and should be stopped,” Mr Allison said.

Prison rules in Japan are notoriously complex and detailed. They govern every aspect of prisoners’ lives, including how they should walk, when they may talk and the sitting posture they should adopt in their cells. Prisoners are even forbidden from making eye contact with each other, or with the guards. “The enforcement of such a tight web of secret rules constitutes inhuman and degrading treatment. All rules must be amended and published in full,” Mr Allison continued.

The report ends by listing measures which should be taken by the Japanese government to reduce the risk of human rights violations in prisons. These include signing up to the United Nations Convention Against Torture, giving non-governmental organisations (NGOs) unrestricted access to prisons, and preventing the use of “protection cells” as a form of punishment.

“Today the United Nations and a large number of NGOs are calling on all governments to ratify the Convention Against Torture,” Mr Allison stated. “This is an ideal time for the Japanese government to ratify the convention and thereby demonstrate its commitment to human rights.”
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**The report will be released at a press conference on:
26 June, 3.00pm, at the Japan Federation of Bar Associations, Tokyo**

Following the press conference there will be a JFBA seminar on prison conditions in Japan and lobbying the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

On 27 June, 2.00pm, there will be a public meeting organised by the Centre for Prisoners Rights, Meeting Room No.1, 4th Floor, Shin Kenkyu Building, Meiji University, Tokyo.