

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Ireland: Irish Government refuses access to Amnesty prison researchers**

LONDON -- "Amnesty International is disappointed at the Irish Government's refusal to allow researchers of a joint Amnesty International and Irish Penal Reform Trust project to visit several named Irish prisons to investigate the issue of racism in Irish detention establishments", the human rights organization said today.

As part of its ongoing work as an international human rights organization, Amnesty International monitors compliance with international standards in prisons throughout the world.

Amnesty has, in the recent past, had access from high-security prisons to detention centres in countries such as Afghanistan, Brazil, Nigeria, Russia and the USA.

"The Irish authorities now have the dubious distinction of joining the governments of Turkey and Egypt in denying Amnesty International researchers access to their prisons.

In January Irene Khan wrote to the then Minister for Justice requesting the cooperation and assistance of his Department to facilitate the research project, undertaken jointly by Amnesty International and the Irish Penal Reform Trust, on whether racism is an issue in prisons in Ireland.

Having received no reply, the Secretary General wrote to the new Minister, Michael McDowell, which was followed by another letter from the Director of Amnesty International Ireland, Sean Love. The Minister of Justice finally sent a written reply refusing Amnesty International's request for access on the grounds that his Department was conducting its own internal review on racism.

"But the 'review' is an internal review; one of many reviews on efficiency and training which are part and parcel of the public service. It is absolutely no substitute for an independent research mission", said Amnesty International.

Even though Amnesty International understands a draft report has been circulating internally for some time, details of the Department of Justice's internal review are not available to the public. Two Freedom of Information applications on its content made by Amnesty International have been rejected by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. And with the greatest respect to the National Training and Development Institute, charged with the government's internal review, it is not a human

rights research body. Nor is its review independent, as its terms of reference have been written by the Department, it is funded by the Department, and its report will first be vetted by the Department before it can come into the public arena.

"The project commissioned by the Irish authorities is not a substitute for an independent, impartial and objective assessment of the issue of racism within Irish prisons," said Irene Khan in a letter to Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. "Furthermore, the project commissioned by the prison authorities and our project are not mutually exclusive," she said.

The critical point here is denial of independent access. Amnesty International has now been left wondering why the Irish authorities have continued to deny access to its researchers.

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