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USA: End inhumane treatment of California prison hunger strikers

California prison authorities have again breached international human rights obligations by taking punitive measures against prisoners on hunger strike over conditions for thousands held in solitary confinement in the state's prisons, Amnesty International said today.

"Prisoners seeking an end to inhumane conditions should not be subjected to punitive measures for exercising their right to engage in peaceful protest," said Angela Wright, Amnesty International's USA researcher.

"Prolonged isolation under conditions which can only be described as cruel and inhumane treatment is prohibited under international law."

More than 1,000 inmates in prisons across California remained on hunger strike as the protest enters its third week.

This is down from approximately 30,000 prisoners in more than 24 prisons who began their hunger strike on 8 July to protest the state's policy of long-term solitary confinement in Security Housing Units (SHU).

On 11 July, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) pledged to take disciplinary action against all those participating in the hunger strike – which may extend their time in the SHU. Hunger strike leaders have also been subjected to increased isolation, where they face harsher conditions and increased restrictions on communication with their lawyers.

A core group of hunger strikers in the Pelican Bay Security Housing Units claim the prison authorities have blasted cold air into their cells, as well as confiscated fluids, hygiene products and legal materials.

At least 500 prisoners have spent more than a decade in the security units in conditions of environmental and social deprivation which flout international standards for humane treatment.

While the Department of Corrections has introduced changes to how individuals are assigned to the units, and how they can work their way out, Amnesty International believes that these reforms do not go far enough in a system that sees so many people locked up under extraordinarily harsh conditions for so long.

Numerous studies have shown that being held under such harsh environmental conditions is detrimental to

a prisoners' psychological and physical health. Prisoners held under these conditions are denied rehabilitative or educational programming, and have little or no social contact, including with family members. Most are eventually released back into mainstream society where the long-term effects of their confinement make reintegration harder.

Amnesty International once again urges the Department of Corrections to introduce long-overdue reforms to the SHU system to ensure that California's treatment of prisoners does not violate its obligation under international human rights law to treat all prisoners humanely.

"It is unsurprising that prisoners in the SHU are protesting the conditions of their detention," said Angela Wright.

"Rather than punishing prisoners further with the threat of disciplinary action the Department of Corrections should commit to meaningful reforms that will address the inhumanity of the state's prison system."

Amnesty International visited California's isolation units in November 2011 and issued a highly critical report, [*USA: The Edge of Endurance*](#).