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USA: California prison authorities ‘toying with the lives’ of inmates on hunger strike

The refusal by California’s prison authorities to explore options to resolve the hunger strike crisis in the state’s high security units is a dangerous move that could lead to the deaths of inmates in their custody, Amnesty International said.

More than 30,000 prisoners joined a hunger strike last July over inhumane detention conditions in California’s security housing units (SHUs). More than 70 are still refusing food.

“It’s nothing short of appalling that instead of dealing with the complaints, California’s prison authorities have chosen to threaten inmates with force-feeding and disciplinary measures, and have moved some to other facilities,” said Tessa Murphy, Campaigner on the USA at Amnesty International.

“No one should be punished for exercising the right to peaceful protest. California prison authorities must stop toying with people’s lives and meet with the mediation team to begin a meaningful process of negotiation.”

Amnesty International has also received reports that some of those on hunger strike have been denied medical care.

This week, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) published a press release saying that it had addressed some of the inmates’ demands.

“Recent proposals by California’s prison authorities do not go far enough to address the inhumanity that permeates many aspects of the security housing units, including lengthy periods during which inmates are held in isolation and excessively harsh conditions of confinement including lack of social contact and programming,” said Tessa Murphy.

“The rehabilitation of prisoners is absolutely essential for their positive reintegration into society at the end of their sentence.”

Amnesty International is calling on CDCR to reduce the length of the step down programme and to make meaningful changes to the isolation units, particularly in Pelican Bay prison, with an emphasis on increased social contact and rehabilitation.

On 19 August, a federal court issued a decision that would allow the state to force-feed hunger strikers “at risk of near-death or great bodily injury”. The court also ruled that the state may ignore “do not resuscitate” directives if they were signed for the purpose of the hunger strike, or if the state believes they were achieved through coercion.

The force feeding of mentally competent hunger strikers is contrary to medical ethics and breaches their right to freedom of expression.