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USA: UN Human Rights Committee to scrutinize US record at home and abroad

As the UN Human Rights Committee prepares to scrutinize the United States' human rights record at home and abroad at hearings scheduled for 17 - 18 July, Amnesty International urged the US government to engage in a detailed and open dialogue with the Committee regarding its commitment to international human rights law and standards, so that its record can be fully examined.

The hearings will consider US implementation of its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which the USA ratified in 1992 and which guarantees fundamental rights including the right to humane treatment, fair trial and freedom from arbitrary detention. This will be the second time the US will be before the Committee. The first time was in 1995.

Amnesty International submitted a briefing to the Committee prior to its preliminary session in March this year, outlining the US's failure to implement key provisions of the ICCPR, both with regard to its domestic policies and in the context of the "war on terror".

Issues highlighted by the organization include human rights violations in relation to thousands of non-US nationals held without charge or trial in US military custody in Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantanamo Bay and secret locations. AI's briefing documented torture and ill-treatment, arbitrary detention, "disappearances" and renditions, as well as concerns about unlawful killings.

Areas where US domestic practices fall short of its obligations under the Covenant include the execution of the mentally ill and other concerns regarding the death penalty; the use of electro-shock weapons by law enforcement officials; cruel conditions of isolation in super-maximum security prisons; policies that leave women prisoners vulnerable to sexual abuse by male guards; the shackling of pregnant women; and the sentencing of children to life in prison without parole.

Two of the key questions the Committee is expected to address will be the US government's contention that the ICCPR does not apply in situations of what the US defines as "war" and that the ICCPR does not apply outside US territory -- even to those held in US custody abroad. Such positions have previously been rejected by most authoritative bodies, including the Committee.

AI delegates will be observing the hearings, which will take place at the Palais de Justice in Geneva. The Committee's conclusions and recommendations will be issued later this month.

To see a full copy of Amnesty International's report, *USA: Updated briefing to the Human Rights Committee on the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, please go to <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engamr511112006>.

