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USA: Proposed reforms will not alleviate the inhumanity of conditions in Security Housing Units in California's prisons

Amnesty International welcomes the California State Assembly Public Safety Committee hearing scheduled for 25 February as an opportunity to review the reforms proposed by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) for the Security Housing Units (SHUs) and to hear testimony from prison advocates, lawyers and family members. The organization hopes that the hearing will be a genuine chance for all stakeholders to positively influence the current reforms being proposed by CDCR.

Amnesty International visited the SHUs in Pelican Bay, Corcoran and Valley State Prison in late 2011 and noted its findings in a report, *'The Edge of Endurance. Prison Conditions in California's Security Housing Units.'* (available at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR51/060/2012/en>).

One of the principal findings of the report was that conditions in Pelican Bay State Prison in particular are inhumane. The totality of the conditions in which inmates are kept for 22.5 hours a day in small, stark cells with no direct access to natural light, meagre access to outdoor exercise in inadequate facilities, and no meaningful human contact constitutes cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in violation of international law.

Under the present reforms, no changes are proposed to address these gratuitously harsh conditions and bring the prison system into compliance with the USA's obligations on the humane treatment of prisoners.

Studies have shown that the effects of such environmental and social deprivation, in which inmates have no recourse to rehabilitative programmes and have limited contact with family members, include severely negative consequences for the psychological and physical integrity of a prisoner – effects which can continue long after release.

In recognition of the severe physical and psychological effects faced by inmates confined for prolonged periods under conditions of reduced sensory and environmental stimulation, Amnesty International is also urging that the proposed step-down program be reduced from four years to two; that measures be introduced that would allow some group interaction for prisoners at all stages of SHU confinement, both to benefit their mental health and well-being and to provide incentives, and to allow for their behaviour to be assessed; and that the program to review the cases of existing SHU prisoners be expanded so that all cases are reviewed within the next three months.

Amnesty International has written to all members of the Public Safety Committee with the organization's priority recommendations, and will be attending the hearing in Sacramento to reiterate that there is no justifiable penological reason for depriving prisoners, even in a segregated environment, of natural light, adequate exercise and adequate human contact. Without reform, conditions in California's SHUs will continue to violate a raft of international standards and treaties governing the treatment of prisoners, including the prohibition of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.