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US Government questioned by UN Committee against Torture, due to respond tomorrow

Geneva -- The UN Committee against Torture this morning highlighted some important areas of concern about the USA's implementation of the Convention against Torture, Amnesty International said today.

Committee members challenged the conditions which the USA attached to its ratification of the Convention in 1994. In particular, they expressed concern about the US Government's insistence on adopting its own definitions of torture and cruelty, rather than those of the treaty.

"We have long expressed concern about the USA's pick and choose approach to international human rights treaties," Amnesty International said. "Such an approach undermines not only the protection afforded to individuals in the USA, but also the whole enterprise of creating a viable international system to ensure respect for human rights."

Committee members also questioned the US delegation on specific areas of concern, including: the use of remote control electro-shock stun belts and other cruel restraint procedures by law enforcement officials;

cruel conditions endured by prisoners held in long-term isolation in supermaximum security units;

the lack of comprehensive national data on the incidence of torture and ill-treatment by police and prison officers; the adequacy of measures to investigate abuses and combat impunity, including legislation restricting the ability of prisoners to take claims of psychological torture before the US courts.

"Amnesty International has repeatedly raised concern about these issues. As such we look forward to the Government's response to the Committee on these and other specific questions," the organization said.

"In addition, we await with interest the USA's replies as they relate to unsupervised access by male guards to women prisoners, conditions of detention of asylum-seekers, and the treatment of children in the US justice system."

The Committee Chairman also questioned the US delegation about prisoners on death row for crimes committed when they were under 18.

"As the USA is virtually the sole remaining country executing juvenile offenders -- in flagrant violation of international law -- it is important that the USA is challenged on the world stage about this practice at every available opportunity," Amnesty International said, noting that another juvenile offender is scheduled to be put to death on 22 June.

Amnesty International observers will be attending the session at which the US Government will respond to the questions, scheduled for 3pm tomorrow, 11 May 2000. The Committee will announce its conclusions and recommendations on the USA on Monday 15 May 2000.

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Copies of Amnesty International report, "USA: A briefing for the UN Committee against Torture" can be obtained from the Amnesty International Geneva office, tel: 00 41 22 798 2500.

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