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USA urged to end inmates' 40 year-long solitary confinement

The US state of Louisiana must immediately remove two inmates from the solitary confinement they were placed in almost 40 years ago, Amnesty International said today.

Albert Woodfox, 64, and Herman Wallace, 69, were placed in "Closed Cell Restriction (CCR)" in Louisiana State Penitentiary - known as Angola Prison - since they were convicted of the murder of a prison guard in 1972. Apart from very brief periods, they have been held in isolation ever since.

"The treatment to which Albert Woodfox and Herman Wallace have been subjected for the past four decades is cruel and inhumane and a violation of the US's obligations under international law," said Guadalupe Marengo, Americas Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

"We are not aware of any other case in the USA where individuals have been subjected to such restricted human contact for such a prolonged period of time."

Over the course of decades there has been no meaningful review of the men's designation to CCR. The only reason given for maintaining the men under these conditions has been due to the "nature of the original reason for lockdown."

Both men were originally arrested for armed robbery.

The men are confined to their cells, which measure 2 x 3 metres, for 23 hours a day. When the weather permits, they are allowed outside three times a week for an hour of solitary recreation in a small outdoor cage.

For four hours a week, they are allowed to leave their cells to shower or walk, alone, along the cell unit corridor.

They have restricted access to books, newspapers and television. For the past four decades they have never been allowed to work or to have access to education. Social interaction has been restricted to occasional visits from friends and family and limited telephone calls.

They have also been denied any meaningful review of the reasons for their isolation.

The men's lawyers have told Amnesty International that both are suffering from serious health problems caused or exacerbated by their years of solitary confinement.

Amnesty International has also raised questions about the legal aspects of the case against the two men.

No physical evidence linking the men to the guard's murder has ever been found; potentially exculpatory DNA evidence has been lost; and the convictions were based on questionable inmate testimony.

Over the years of litigation on the cases, documents have emerged suggesting that the main eyewitness was bribed by prison officials into giving statements against the men and that the state withheld evidence about the perjured testimony of another inmate witness. A further witness later retracted his testimony.

Apart from ongoing legal challenges to their murder convictions, Albert Woodfox and Herman Wallace are suing the Louisiana authorities claiming that their prolonged isolation is "cruel and unusual punishment" and so violates the US Constitution.

"The treatment of these men by the state of Louisiana is a clear breach of US commitment to human rights," said Guadalupe Marengo.

"Their cases should be reviewed as a matter of urgency, and while that takes place authorities must ensure that their treatment complies with international standards for the humane treatment of prisoners."