

Amnesty International reports widespread human rights violations in the US

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A new report from Amnesty International paints a chilling picture of American society, including police brutality, abuse of children, prisoners, asylum-seekers and others, and the use of high-tech tools of repression and torture. Numerous violations of international standards of human rights are cited, as well as the role of the US in exporting weapons to governments known to carry out torture, and training the personnel to use these weapons.

In its first campaign centered on an industrialized nation in the West, the human rights advocacy group issued a 153-page report October 6, entitled: 'United States of America--Rights for All.' The report is the basis of a year-long campaign planned by Amnesty International to bring US human rights violations to worldwide attention.

The report documents abuses in all 50 US states, in rural as well as urban areas. According to Amnesty International, human rights violations are committed by police, corrections officers, judges and sheriffs, and officials of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. In the majority of cases, these individuals are not prosecuted for these abuses, and state and federal laws sanction the violence.

The report documents a pervasive pattern of police brutality. Thousands of individuals file complaints each year against police departments and individual officers. 'Police officers have beaten and shot unresisting suspects; they have misused batons, chemical sprays and electro-shock weapons; they have injured or killed people by placing them in dangerous holds.'

Police departments and correctional institutions in many states condone the use of stun guns and tasers, which typically emit 50,000 volts of electricity into the victim's body. Deaths have been reported from the use of these weapons. Deaths have also been reported as a

result of choke holds and hog-tying (where victims' wrists and ankles are tied together).

Abuse of women and children in prisons and jails is widespread. As of June 1998, more than 3,500 children convicted as adults were housed with adult prisoners, putting them at risk of physical and sexual abuse. Women prisoners, who make up 10 percent of the prison population, are at high risk of sexual assault. 'Reported sexual abuses by correctional staff include rape and other coerced sexual acts; staff routinely subjecting inmates to sexually offensive language; staff deliberately touching intimate parts of inmates' bodies during searches.' Women prisoners have reported being shackled and in full restraints while pregnant or in labor.

Abusive use of restraints is reported.

* The four-point restraint chair--where straps secure the arms, legs, shoulders and chest--have resulted in injuries. A prisoner in Maricopa County, Arizona died after being placed in a restraint chair with a towel over his face.

* The remote-control electro-shock stun belt, which can be activated by the push of a button, causes instant incapacitation.

* The use of chain gangs (prisoners laboring in leg-irons) is not banned by US law. Chain gangs operate once again in Alabama, Arizona, Florida and Wisconsin.

Asylum-seekers are treated as criminals, according to the report. An Amnesty International press release states: 'People who have been persecuted and tortured in their homelands frequently arrive in the USA sick, disoriented, unable to speak English, and deeply traumatized. For reception, they are likely to be shackled and thrown into jail by the INS.' In addition, female asylum-seekers are at high risk of sexual assault

and children may be separated from their families.

Widespread use and abuse of the death penalty is documented. The death penalty is legal in 38 US states, and more than 3,300 people sit on death row. In 1997 alone, 74 people were executed, the highest number in 40 years. People who were less than 18 years old at the time of the crime can be legally executed in 24 states. More than 30 mentally impaired people have been executed in the US since 1989.

The US violates the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, which requires local authorities to promptly inform arrested foreigners of their right to consular assistance. According to Amnesty International: 'More than 60 foreign nationals are under sentence of death in the USA. Since 1992, the USA has executed at least five foreign nationals. Most were not informed of their Vienna Convention rights.'

The report charges that US arms and military training contribute to human rights abuses in other countries. Weapons and military equipment supplied to governments and armed groups committing 'torture, political killings, 'disappearances,' and other human rights abuses' include: attack helicopters, armored personnel carriers, trucks, jet fighters, stun guns, remote-controlled electro-shock belts, rifles, small arms, ammunition and riot-control chemical weapons. Amnesty International confirms the use of these weapons in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan and South Africa.

'Thousands of foreign military officers are trained in the USA every year and US armed forces conduct training programs and joint exercises around the globe,' Amnesty International declares. The School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia is the best known of these facilities. Foreign officers trained there have been implicated in gross human rights abuses. Several private US companies, closely linked to the US Department of Defense, are now providing military training formerly offered only by governments. The armed forces of Bosnia-Herzegovina were trained by one such company.

See also:

US cited for widespread human rights abuses
First in a series of articles on Amnesty International report



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