US cited for widespread human rights abuses

First in a series of articles on Amnesty International report

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Amnesty International released its report 'United States of America--Rights for All' on October 6. The report 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. The report is the basis of a year-long campaign planned by the human rights group to bring US human rights violations to worldwide attention.

In the coming weeks the World Socialist Web Site *will present a detailed examination of the contents of this report. Today's installment deals with the first two chapters: 'Rights for all: Introduction' and 'Universal Human Rights: International Standards.'*

The Amnesty International report opens with the passage: 'The USA was founded in the name of democracy, political and legal equality, and individual freedom. However, despite its claims to international leadership in the field of human rights, and its many institutions to protect individual civil liberties, the USA is failing to deliver the fundamental promise of rights for all.'

Amnesty International presents a well-documented, convincing case to back up this statement. The tragic death of Anthony Baez in New York City in December 1994 is cited. Baez was murdered by police while he and he brothers played street football in the Bronx. After their football accidentally hit a patrol car, police officer Francis X. Livoti seized Baez and held him by the neck, while other cops knelt on his back as he lay face down on the pavement. He died of suffocation as a result of the chokehold.

The City of New York recently agreed to a $3 million settlement in a wrongful death suit filed by Baez's family. But while the settlement is a record dollar amount, the city has admitted no guilt in the incident, claiming that Livoti was an out-of-control cop. However, this police officer had at least nine previous complaints of brutality against him. Livoti was acquitted on manslaughter charges in a nonjury trial in New York State Supreme Court in 1996, but earlier this year was convicted on federal charges of violating Baez's civil rights.

This case is not an isolated one, according to Amnesty International: 'The US Justice Department receives thousands of complaints of police abuse each year, which many regard as but the tip of the iceberg.' Prison guards, immigration officials as well as police officers and departments are engaged in widespread abuse of human rights. However, these abuses are not simply the result of individual misconduct. In large urban police departments authorities turn a blind eye to them. While local authorities pay out millions of dollars a year in compensation to victims of violence, wrongdoing is rarely admitted and prosecution of the individual officers is rarely successful.

Some 1.7 million people are imprisoned in the US today, and these prisoners are the victims of some of the cruelest abuse. Many are the target of violence by guards, held in overcrowded conditions, isolated for long periods of time, and restrained by degrading and often life-threatening methods. The report says: 'Victims include pregnant women, the mentally ill and even children. The weakness of independent scrutiny, together with a public mood demanding harsher treatment of offenders, have created a climate in which such human rights violations can occur.'

Treatment of immigrants and asylum-seekers is particularly harsh: 'As if they were criminals, many asylum-seekers are placed behind bars when they arrive in the country. Some are held in shackles. They are detained indefinitely in conditions that are sometimes inhuman and degrading.'

Three thousand three hundred people presently sit on death row across the US, and more than 350 have been executed since 1990. The treatment of immigrants and the US use of the death penalty--including its application to juvenile offenders--are the subject of subsequent chapters of the report, which will be dealt with in future *WSWS* installments.

Inequality, racism and discrimination

The Amnesty report points to the extreme disparity of wealth and opportunity existing in the United States as a major factor leading to the disregard for human rights. Millions are denied adequate education and health care. Nine percent of the country's children live in extreme poverty. Alcoholism and

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drug addition are pervasive. Minorities and the poor regularly receive inadequate legal counsel.

The report documents the prevalence of racism and its outcome reflected in the lives of minorities. Homicide is the leading cause of death among young blacks. The report comments: 'Despite serious attempts this century to overcome racism, the USA has not succeeded in eradicating the discriminatory treatment of blacks (African Americans), Latinos and other minority groups, including Native Americans, Asian Americans and Arab Americans. According to estimates, up to one third of all young black men are in jail or prison, or on parole or probation. Black people are three times less likely to be employed than whites with similar qualifications.' Segregation of black and Hispanic children in inner-city schools is commonplace.

Despite laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender, women suffer continual discrimination and violence. Women face abuse at the hands of police and prison officials, and victims of rape and domestic violence often get little support from the police and judicial system in prosecuting their offenders.

Homosexuals can be legally fired from their jobs in 39 states because of their sexual orientation. 'Reports of violence against gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and HIV-positive people have increased,' says Amnesty. The recent savage murder of Matthew Shepard, a 22-year-old gay University of Wyoming student, is evidence of the escalation of this violence.

Particular incidents of those targeted by the American legal system for their political beliefs include:

* Thirty military personnel imprisoned in 1991-92 for their conscientious objection to the Persian Gulf war;

* The imprisonment of Geronimo ji Jaga (Pratt), a former leader of the Black Panther Party who was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder in 1972 in Los Angeles. He was released on bail in 1997. Amnesty International has called for an investigation into his case on the grounds that he may have been denied a fair trial because of his political beliefs.

* The two life sentences given to Leonard Peltier, a member of the American Indian Movement, who was convicted in 1977 for the murder of two FBI agents in 1975. Amnesty International believes that he was not given a fair trial on political grounds.

The denial of civil rights

The report continues: 'For 130 years after ratification, the Bill of Rights was an expression of aspirations which were denied to whole communities. Indigenous peoples were slaughtered, forced off their lands and had their cultural traditions destroyed. Slaves were 'non-persons', who were whipped, branded, imprisoned and hanged without trial. Slavery was finally abolished in 1865, but racial segregation remained legal until the 1960s, underpinning a system in which black people faced discrimination at work, at school and at the hands of the police and criminal justice system. Women were denied the right to vote until 1920, and continued to face gender discrimination.'

Many sections of the population have conducted struggles to defend their civil rights throughout the twentieth century. Violations of these rights have included arrests and killings of trade unionists, the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee, 'Red Scares' following both World Wars, and school and other forms of legalized segregation. Many people lost their lives in the struggle against these abuses of civil and human rights.

Despite this history, however, according to Amnesty International, 'surveys suggest that today many in the USA are unfamiliar with the rights they possess, and do not appreciate that the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are there to protect everyone in the USA from abuse of power by the government. There is often popular support for restricting or ignoring certain provisions in the Bill of Rights. Recent initiatives by the Congress (such as *habeas corpus* reform and the Prison Litigation Reform Act of 1996), impede the ability of federal courts to intervene when rights are violated.'

International standards

The report cites the five international human rights treaties that have been ratified by the US. These include: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination; and two treaties defining the status and rights of refugees. Subsequent chapters of the report document the systematic violation of the provisions of these treaties in the US.

It is also noted that the United States and Somalia are the only two countries which have not ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

See:

Police brutality in America:

Part Two on Amnesty International's report of human rights abuses in the US

The full text of the Amnesty International report can be accessed at: http://www.rightsforall-usa.org/info/report/index.htm

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