Violence and brutality in the prison system

Part 3 in a series of articles on Amnesty International report on human rights abuses in the US

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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.

As part of a detailed examination of the Amnesty International report by the World Socialist Web Site, *today's installment deals with the fourth chapter: 'Violations in prisons and jails: Needless brutality.'*

'Every day in prisons and jails across the USA, the human rights of prisoners are violated. In many facilities, violence is endemic. In some cases, guards fail to stop inmates assaulting each other. In others, the guards are themselves the abusers, subjecting their victims to beatings and sexual abuse. Prisons and jails use mechanical, chemical and electro-shock methods of restraint that are cruel, degrading and sometimes life-threatening. The victims of abuse include pregnant women and the mentally ill.'

This is Amnesty International's description of a prison system in the US based on punishment and incapacitation, and a disregard and violation of internationally established standards of safeguards to protect prisoners. This chapter from the human rights organization's recently released report contains documentation of so many incidents of brutality against prisoners that this article can only serve to call attention to the most alarming of the abuses.

As of mid-1997, 1.7 million people were held in US jails and prisons. This figure has doubled since 1980. According to Amnesty, the increase reflects 'long-term rises in crime, and state and federal sentencing policies which have led to longer prison terms, fewer releases on parole, and mandatory minimum prison sentences, especially for drugs offences.' Racial and ethnic minorities account for more than 60 percent of the prison population. The number of women prisoners has increased from 5,600 in 1970 to 75,000 in 1997.

Conditions in prisons include: 'overflowing toilets and pipes; toxic and insanitary environments; prisoners forced to sleep on filthy floors without mattresses; cells infested with vermin and lacking ventilation.' Many jails and prisons have no policies and procedures on the use of force, and prison personnel lack adequate training.

State legislation has led to increased numbers of children held in adult facilities, putting them at great risk for physical and sexual abuse. The majority of US states have recently passed legislation allowing juveniles to be prosecuted as adults when they are accused of specific crimes, especially murder. As of June 1998 more than 3,500 children were being held in adult prison facilities.

The US prison system has steadily shifted away from rehabilitation of inmates in recent years. In 1994 Congress voted to halt the use of federal funds for higher education for prisoners. As of last year, 36 states and the federal government were operating 57 supermaximum security (or 'supermax') facilities, housing more than 13,000 prisoners, designed for long-term isolation of those prisoners deemed too dangerous by authorities to be held alongside the general prison population. Prisoners in these facilities spend 22 to 24 hours a day confined to small, solitary cells, many with no windows and little access to natural light or fresh air.

Management of prison facilities has been increasingly assigned to private firms. 'As a result,' according to the report, 'incarceration has become one of the fastest growing businesses in the USA, generating large profits for the corporations that now house more than 77,000 prison and jail inmates.' Other prison services, in particular health care, have been contracted out to companies which have in turn profited at the direct expense of the health and lives of prisoners.

Deficiencies in medical treatment for prisoners include lack of screening for tuberculosis, scarcity of medical and psychiatric staff, inadequate treatment for prisoners with HIV/AIDS, lack of access for women to gynecological and obstetric care, and grossly deficient treatment for the mentally ill.

A growing number of states, having run out of space, transport prisoners to out-of-state facilities, often thousands of miles from home: 'Such transferrals can cause extreme hardship, including loss of contact with family and friends, and problems in communicating with lawyers.' The example is cited of women prisoners from Hawaii being transferred to a privately-run prison in Crystal City, Texas.

Cruel and inhumane treatment

Conditions within US prisons put inmates at continual physical risk. According to Amnesty, 'sexual violence and extortion are rife in many prisons and jails,' and 'rape of prisoners by other inmates is reported to be alarmingly widespread.' In violation of international standards, many jails do not segregate pre-trial detainees from convicted prisoners.

The use of excessive force and cruel and inhumane treatment of

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prisoners by prison staff is rampant. Instances cited in the report include:

* The staging of 'gladiator' fights between inmates at Corcoran State Prison in California, where officials placed bets on the outcome.

* An August 1995 incident at the Graham Unit of the Arizona State prison, when 600 prisoners were forced by guards to remain outdoors, handcuffed, for 96 hours, required to defecate and urinate in their clothes. Many suffered severe sunburn, heat exhaustion and dehydration in the intense heat.

* In August 1997 in a privately-run section of Brazoria County Detention Center in Texas a video tape showed guards 'kicking and beating inmates, coaxing dogs to bite prisoners and using stun guns.'

Sexual abuse

According to Amnesty International, sexual abuse of women prisoners by prison staff includes: 'rape and other coerced sexual acts; staff routinely subjecting inmates to sexually offensive language; staff deliberately touching intimate parts of inmates' bodies during searches; and staff watching inmates who are undressed.' Rape of prisoners is a form of torture which is a violation of international human rights standards, such as the Convention against Torture. According to the report, one of the main reasons these sexual assaults continue is that the victims are afraid to complain, fearing retaliation.

Rape of male inmates by other prisoners is widespread, due in large part to overcrowding, and the confining of prisoners with no regard to their backgrounds. A 1994 survey of Nebraska prisoners found 10 percent of males reporting being 'pressured or forced to have sexual contact' with other prisoners. In some cases, prison officials place inmates together with the knowledge that these abuses will most likely occur.

Widespread use of restraints

As is the case in US police departments, abusive use of restraints in US prisons and jails is widespread. According to Amnesty International: 'The cruel use of restraints, resulting in unnecessary pain, injury or even death, is widespread in US prisons and jails. Mentally disturbed prisoners have been bound, spread-eagled, on boards for prolonged periods in four-point restraints without proper authorization of supervision. Restraints are deliberately imposed as punishment, or used as a routine control measure rather than as an emergency response.'

The use of chains and leg-irons is not barred by US law, and they are often used to shackle prisoners during transportation. Pregnant women are often held in some type of restraint when transported to the hospital to give birth. A court in Washington, DC heard evidence of a women who was placed in handcuffs and leg shackles immediately after delivering her child and before delivery of the afterbirth.

Use of steel-framed restraint chairs has resulted in some of the most severe abuses of prisoners and in intake areas of jails. The prisoner is immobilized by four-point restraints which secure the arms, legs, shoulders and chest. Incidents of abuse by this method have included the following incidents.

* In March 1997 prisoner Michael Valent in Utah State Prison died from a blood clot after being held in a restraint chair for 16 hours: 'His feet were secured with metal shackles and the seat had a hole to allow him to defecate and urinate without moving.'

* Scott Norberg asphyiated in June 1996 at the Madison Street Jail in Maricopa County, Arizona after being placed in a restraint chair with a towel wrapped over his face.

The report cites an horrific incident at the Utah State Prison related to the abuse of restraints: 'An inmate with a history of self-mutilation was shackled to a steel board on a cell floor in four-point metal restraints for 12 weeks in 1995. He was removed from the board on average four times a week to shower. At other times he was left to defecate while lying on the board. He was released from the board only following a court order.'

Chemical sprays and electro-shock devices

Prison officials have abused prisoners with gas and chemical sprays, including mace, tear-gar and pepper (OC) spray. In one incident at the Northeast Ohio Correctional Center in May 1997 guards dropped 20 canisters of tear-gas into prisoners' cell blocks following a nonviolent protest. 'Soon afterwards, some were allegedly sprayed directly in the face with mace as a punishment while handcuffed.'

Many US prisons and jails allow the use of electro-shock weapons, including stun belts, stun shields and stun guns. The report cites one particularly abusive incident: 'In 1996 in Muncy Prison, Pennsylvania, staff used an 'Electronic Body Immobilizer Device' to subdue a woman prisoner who was in great distress after a warrant for her execution had been read.' At an Arizona jail a stun gun was reportedly used to wake up a prisoner.

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

See Also:

US cited for widespread human rights abuses:
First in a series of articles on Amnesty International report
[17 October 1998]

Giuliani and Rikers Island: New York prison administers medicine for profit
[24 October 1998]

Police brutality in America:
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