

Amnesty International condemns US for violations of UN Convention Against Torture

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The United States appeared Wednesday, May 10 in front of the United Nations Convention Against Torture in Geneva in its first appearance before the body since ratifying the convention six years ago. The human rights group Amnesty International filed a 45-page report with the UN committee that documented specific cases where the US has violated the international pact.

Amnesty International stated, "Since the United States ratified the Convention Against Torture in October 1994, its increasingly punitive approach towards offenders has continued to lead to practices which facilitate torture or other forms of ill-treatment prohibited under international law."

AI expressed particular concern that the US continues to insist on adhering to its own definitions of torture and cruelty, rather than those of the international treaty: "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."

The human rights group drew attention to the skyrocketing US prison population, which recently hit two million, contributing to widespread mistreatment of men, women and juveniles in custody. They also cited numerous instances of police brutality as well as a bias in the court and prison system against racial and ethnic minorities.

The US also executes juvenile offenders, who were less than 18 at the time of the crime for which they have been sentenced to death. One such execution is scheduled for June 22.

Specific instances of torture and institutionalized torture detailed in the Amnesty International report included:

The use of electro-shock from stun guns: Inmate Ronnie Hawkins was subjected to an eight-second

50,000-volt shock from a remote-controlled stun belt in open court at the order of a judge, in an attempt to quiet verbal statements by the prisoner. Over the past decade 100 federal, state and local jurisdictions have acquired stun belts.

Virginia prisoner Perry Conner was beaten in the genital area and repeatedly electro-shocked until he lost bowel control, and then was not allowed to shower for six days.

Widespread use of shackling, handcuffing and four-point restraint: Several deaths had been reported in association with use of the four-point restraint chair. The report documents the regular use of these methods against children in a South Dakota juvenile facility.

Punitive use of pepper-spray: Inmate James Earl Livingston, a mentally ill man, died after being pepper-sprayed and left in a restraint chair. Liquid pepper spray was swabbed directly into the eyes of nonviolent anti-logging protesters. There have been reports that the technique was also used against World Trade Organization protesters in Seattle in the fall of 1999.

US Assistant Secretary for Human Rights Harold H. Koh, leading the US delegation to the UN convention and Geneva, while asserting the "unequivocal and unambiguous condemnation of torture as a tool of governmental policy" on the part of the US, admitted that there have been instances, "and in some cases even patterns or practices of" police abuse, torture and excessive force against prisoners and suspects. Koh acknowledged that these methods have included the use of tear gas, pepper-spray, stun guns, stun belts, police dogs, handcuffs and leg shackles.

The US submitted a 74-page report to the UN convention detailing its human rights record in relation to the treaty. The report listed racial bias and sexual abuse of prisoners as areas where the US was not in

compliance. Also listed as “problem areas” were lack of police accountability, overcrowded prisons and confinement of children in substandard or abusive correctional facilities.

UN committee chairman Peter Thomas Burns, a Canadian law professor, singled out the reported use of stun guns and belts by federal marshals as “quite alarming.” These devices can be set off accidentally, delivering high-voltage shocks causing severe pain. The UN committee also questioned the US delegation on the following specific areas of concern:

- * inhumane treatment of prisoners due to long-term isolation in supermaximum security units;

- * the lack of comprehensive national data on mistreatment and torture by police and prison officials;

- * inadequate methods to investigate abuses, including legislation restricting the ability of prisoners to take claims of psychological torture before the US courts.

The US delegation was scheduled to respond to questions raised by the UN committee on Thursday afternoon, May 11. The United Nations committee plans to announce its conclusions and recommendations in relation to the US and the Convention against Torture on Monday, May 15.



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