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The Bahamas: Amnesty International calls for a commission of inquiry into conditions at the Carmichael Detention Centre

Reports of possible use of excessive force by law enforcement officials during a fire and confrontation at the Carmichael Detention Centre yesterday, in which 9 detainees and 11 soldiers were injured, underline the need for the Government of the Bahamas to establish an independent commission of inquiry into conditions at the Carmichael Detention Centre, said Amnesty International today.

Amnesty International has received reports that some detainees are alleging that several people, including women and children, were severely beaten with batons and that police prevented detainees from leaving the facility once the fire started. The authorities have stated that soldiers fired rubber rounds to restore order after detainees tried to secure and subsequently set fire to a room. A newspaper also published an unconfirmed report that one man sustained a gunshot wound. The action reportedly followed what appeared to be attempts by immigration staff and soldiers to remove Cuban detainees for deportation.

"The inquiry must be able to make recommendations, arising from its findings, on how the organisation of immigration detention conditions could be changed or improved," Amnesty International said.

The organisation also urged both the Government and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to ensure, in their response to yesterday's incident, the full protection of asylum-seekers from forcible return and discrimination.

Background Information

On 8 December the Minister of Labour and Immigration presented a report to Parliament, following an investigation into several allegations of ill-treatment at the Carmichael Detention Centre raised by Amnesty International and other organisations.

The report, while welcome, failed to address serious issues, including the indefinite detention of children. Amnesty International will be providing the Government with a formal response to the report and is seeking more information on the remit of the police investigation, amid concerns including witness protection and availability.

In 2002, Amnesty International recommended that the Government establish a multi-disciplinary Inspectorate Body, independent of Government, with the power to undertake regular visits to the Carmichael Immigrant Detention Centre with a view to hearing detainee grievances, issuing public reports

and recommendations. The body should be granted full and independent access to detainees. Other recommendations included extending an invitation to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention to visit and report on arbitrary detention in the Bahamas and ensuring detention policies and practices comply with international standards.

The Carmichael Detention Centre houses foreign nationals alleged by the authorities to have breached immigration laws, including asylum-seekers.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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