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USA: Conditions in Tamms maximum security prison in Illinois flout international standards for humane treatment of prisoners

Amnesty International reiterates its concern that the conditions prevailing in Tamms maximum security prison (CMAX), Illinois -- in which prisoners are held in cellular confinement in stark surroundings for months or years, with little exercise or human contact, and no work, religious or educational programs -- flout international standards for humane treatment.

In a letter to Michael P. Randle, Director of the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC), the organization expresses concern that such conditions have been found to cause serious psychological and physical harm even to those with no pre-existing health problems and can be particularly cruel and damaging in the case of individuals who are mentally ill.

Amnesty International is also deeply concerned that, despite IDOC regulations allowing the exclusion of people with serious mental illness from the facility, such prisoners continue to be held at Tamms and denied proper diagnosis or treatment. Failure to treat prisoners who are mentally ill contravenes international standards requiring that everyone have access to the highest attainable standard of mental health care.

Persistent reports have been brought to the organization's attention of prisoners exhibiting disturbed or psychotic behaviour while confined alone to their high security cells, including acts of self mutilation and smearing faeces on themselves, yet few prisoners have reportedly been placed in the prison's special treatment unit.

Amnesty International is further disturbed by the results of an investigation carried out by the *Belleville News-Democrat* that, although Tamms was intended to house dangerous prisoners who commit acts of violence in other prisons, many of those transferred there have not committed such crimes. According to the newspaper, more than half the 247 inmates listed in the prison's register in June 2009 had not been convicted of a crime after entering the prison system. A significant proportion of the remainder had committed acts such as throwing bodily wastes or struggling with guards which did not result in serious injury and which in some cases could be attributed to mental illness.

Amnesty International welcomes the review of policies and conditions at Tamms by Director Randle, and urges that it address both conditions and the criteria for transferring prisoners to and from the facility. Both issues have been of longstanding concern among penal reformers, members of the state legislature and the community.

Amnesty International is urging IDOC to ensure that safeguards are put in place to ensure that all those held in custody are treated humanely, and that transfers of prisoners to highly restrictive settings such as Tamms are appropriately regulated. Such measures should include fair and transparent procedures for transfers to and from Tamms, with due process hearings and effective oversight.

The organization is strongly urging authorities to ensure that prisoners with serious mental illness are not placed at Tamms supermax facility; that steps are taken to ensure that no prisoner is held in prolonged isolation unless shown to be a clear and present danger to other prisoners or staff or to the safe operation of other institutions; that conditions and quality of life for all inmates at Tamms are immediately improved, including better exercise, more opportunities for education and self-improvement, and allowing phone calls and contact visits and some form of group activity where

possible. Such measures would assist in providing opportunities for prisoners to earn their way out of the facility as was its original purpose. They would also be consistent with international standards which emphasize the importance of all prisoners engaging in activities for their mental and physical wellbeing in order to enhance rehabilitation and prepare individuals for their eventual return to society.

Amnesty International also endorses the recommendation made by Illinois legislators, mental health advocates and civic and faith groups that a Commission appointed by the Mental Health Division of the Illinois Department of Human Services should be charged with reviewing mental health policy, standards and treatment at Tamms, and any other prison where persons with mental illness may be held in isolation.

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