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Australia: Unresolved “white” youth’s cell death -- answers still needed

On the 10th anniversary of Steven Wardle’s death in a police cell, Amnesty International today is calling on Australian state governments to take action now against high numbers of deaths in custody among non-Aborigines and Aborigines alike.

“How many more families like Stephen Wardle’s will see the government dismiss all calls for action?” Amnesty International said. “Relatives need to find out what happened and to see justice done, especially when serious questions emerge about whether official investigations were effective.”

Stephen Wardle, a non-Aboriginal 18-year old, was found dead in the East Perth police lockup on 1 February 1988, only hours after his arrest. Serious open questions on the time and cause of his death have remained after previous investigations, but the Western Australia Government rejected calls for a judicial inquiry. A newly-formed Anti-Corruption Commission is currently “unable to comment” on its 1997 inquiry into the suspicious circumstances surrounding Stephen Wardle’s death, including the disappearance of crucial evidence and alteration of police records.

“Stephen Wardle’s death, and recent record high numbers of prison deaths since 1980, highlight the need for the Australian authorities to ensure that the 1991 Royal Commission's recommendations are fully implemented for the benefit of all prisoners -- Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal,” Amnesty International said.

Recently, five prisoner deaths in only nine weeks in a single, commercially-run prison near Melbourne have raised serious concerns about prisoner health care and suicide prevention. Preliminary national figures for 1997 indicate continuing high levels of deaths in custody, particularly among Aboriginal prisoners.

“The government’s focus on Aboriginal health and welfare outside prison is welcome, but overlooks an urgent need for practical action inside detention facilities,” Amnesty International said. “Reforms of custodial procedures can only prevent prisoner deaths if they are effectively carried out. If prisoner records suggest medical risks, the government must ensure that all relevant prison staff are aware of that risk, and of the need for special vigilance.”

A ministerial summit in July 1997 focused on Aboriginal deaths in custody but failed to agree on binding targets. The summit outcome statement did not address any of the immediate problems identified in a major Amnesty International report launched ahead of the event.

Unlike most Aboriginal deaths in custody at the time, Stephen Wardle’s death was never investigated by a Royal Commission, and previous investigations into the case fell short of recommended international standards. ENDS.../

For details or a copy of Amnesty International’s report *Australia-Deaths in custody: how many more?* please contact Amnesty International Australia (Tel. 02 9281 4188).