

HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN

for political prisoners

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HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN UNITED STATES PRISONS - Roger Wareham

This outline will give a general picture of the scope and gravity of human right violations in United States prisons, and highlight particular cases which compel our attention.

Alejandrina Torres, Puerto Rican Prisoner of War, has been subjected to isolation, sensory deprivation and behavior modification techniques while at the Lexington High Security Unit for women political prisoners and strip searched and cavity searched by male guards in other federal prisons. Sekou Odinga was beaten and tortured in New York State prison and in Kings County Hospital in 1981. His fingernails were pulled out, his head repeatedly immersed in foul water and his skin scarred with cigarettes. He was hospitalized for over six months with a nearly-destroyed pancreas and other injuries. While these are extreme cases, many political prisoners are subjected to practices which clearly are torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and are prohibited by Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 25 of the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man.

Political detainees, particularly Muslim prisoners are prohibited from engaging in the rituals required by their faith. Many other political prisoners are denied access to collective worship, priests and ministers of their faiths in clear violation of Article 41 of the United Nation Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. Prisoners who are recognized within prisons for their religious leadership are often isolated, harrassed and transferred by prison administrators.

Sentenced political prisoners are denied access to education and meaningful work. These deprivations, added to isolation, are characteristic of control units within state and federal prisons in addition to the infamous Marion Federal Prison.

Many international covenants assert the primacy of family life, and Article 11 of the Universal Declaration specifically prohibits arbitrary disruption of privacy and family life and communication. The police operations which resulted in the arrests of the New York 8, the Ohio 7 and the Hartford 15 ransacked homes, placed large numbers of family and friends under surveillance and sundered many families. The home of Fulani Sunni Ali, who was not accused of any crime, only sought as a witness, was surrounded by armored units and military helicopters. The police forces arrested every man, woman and child in the house, only giving up when they could not find handcuffs small enough for an 18 month old child.

The Justice Department has allowed children to made targets of police investigation and detained and interrogated some of these children for months at a time. The children of the Ohio 7 were the subject of a 30 page dossier which included their medical histories and records. The US government has repeatedly tried to take custody of the children of political prisoners, and the children of Dylcia Pagan and Haydee Torres have had to be hidden from the government.

Denial of bail to Filiberto Ojeda Rios and Laura Whitehorn violates Article 9 of the Universal Declaration, Article 25 of the Rights & Duties of Man, Article 9 of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and Article 6 of the European Covenant on Human Rights. Historically in the United States, government and police forces have not respected any legal restraint in their pursuit and detention of political activists. Every agreement governing police procedure and deadly force has been broken. The 1987 and 1988 violations of federal court decree in Handshu vs Special Service Division in New York City are a ready example.

We want to assert that the US government has theory and practices which are designed to criminalize political prisoners before trial and to prevent the fair and public hearing before an independent and impartial tribunal which is called for in Article 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Extensive and prejudicial pre-trial publicity and security arrangements which intimidate the community and cost millions of dollars make these intentions clear.

Political prisoners are consistently receiving sentences which are multiples of the sentences typically given to persons acting without political motivation. Alicia Rodriguez is serving 85 years for Seditious Conspiracy, Susan Rosenberg and Tim Blunk wre given 58 years each for possession of explosives, and Linda Evans received 40 years for possession of two handguns. These examples together with the numerous Black leader who have been jailed for over twenty years for political acts inspire our call for amnesty for political prisoners in the United States.

In closing, we restate that Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights upholds that all peoples have the right to self-determination and calls upon states to promote and sustain that right. Article 21 and 28 of the same document support the rights of everyone to take part in the political and social life and to work for social justice and international peace. It is our position the US government in its treatment and continued detention of over 150 political prisoners stands in flagrant violation of international covenants of human rights.