

Prisoners' Strike against Torture in California Prisons

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The torture of prisoners in U.S. custody isn't confined to foreign countries. For more than two weeks, inmates at California's Pelican Bay State Prison have been on a hunger strike to protest torturous conditions in the Security Housing Unit (SHU) there. Prisoners have been held for years in solitary confinement, which can amount to torture. Thousands of inmates throughout California's prison system have refused food in solidarity with the Pelican Bay prisoners, bringing the total of hunger strikers to more than 1,700.

Inmates in the SHU are confined to their cells for 22 ½ hours a day, mostly for administrative convenience. They are released for only one hour to walk in a small area with high walls. The cells in the SHU are eight feet by 10 feet with no windows. Fluorescent lights are often kept on 24 hours per day.

Solitary confinement can lead to hallucinations, catatonia and even suicide, particularly in mentally ill prisoners. It is considered torture, as journalist Lance Tapley explains in his chapter on American Supermax prisons in *The United States and Torture: Interrogation, Incarceration, and Abuse*.

The Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons (CSAAP), which is headed by a former U.S. attorney general and a former chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals, found: "People who pose no real threat to anyone and also those who are mentally ill are languishing for months or years in high-security units." The commission also stated, "In some places, the environment is so severe that people end up completely isolated, confined in constantly bright or constantly dim spaces without any meaningful contact - torturous condition that are proven to cause mental deterioration."

Prisoners in other California prisons have reported that medications, including those for high blood pressure and other serious conditions, are being withheld from prisoners on strike. "The situation is grave and urgent," according to Carol Strickman, a lawyer for the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity coalition. "We are fighting to prevent a lot of deaths at Pelican Bay. The CDCR [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation] needs to negotiate with these prisoners, and honor the request of the strike leaders to have access to outside mediators to ensure that any negotiations are in good faith."

One of the hunger strike demands is an end to the "debriefing process" at Pelican Bay. Prisoners are forced to name themselves or others as gang members as a condition of access to food or release from isolation. Naming others as gang members itself amounts to a death sentence due to retaliation by other prisoners.

In May, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that incarceration in California prisons constitutes unconstitutional cruel and unusual punishment.

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