



From the President

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Clean torture

Being alone is not necessarily a humane sentence

A few months ago 1700 prisoners in California's corrections institutions statewide went on a three-week long hunger strike. The strike was in support of other prisoners being held in long-term solitary confinement in the Security Housing Unit or SHU at Pelican Bay State Prison in Crescent City. The strike ended, for now anyway, with some concessions by the California Department of Corrections and a hearing held on August 23 by San Francisco Democratic Assemblyman Tom Ammiano. Further changes in the SHU are promised.

Pelican Bay prison was opened in 1989 and then considered the "prison of the future" with cutting edge technology and security devices. Within the prison compound is a prison-within-a prison, the SHU, a series of three concrete bunkers separate from the rest of the prison. The inmates held there are considered by prison officials as the "worst of the worst." They are subject to conditions far harsher than anywhere else in the California prison system, or for that matter, in nearly any prison in the United States.

A prisoner held in solitary confinement in the SHU is placed alone in a nearly soundproof six by eight-foot windowless concrete box, for 22 to 23 hours per day. A florescent light is never turned off. One hour, four times a week is allocated for the solitary use of a separate concrete exercise yard. Three 15-minute solitary showers are offered per week. There is no phone. Family visits are allowed once a month; they are held by phone behind thick plexiglass. No touching is permitted. There are no recreation or educational programs, no hobby or craft material. Meals are provided on a tray slid through a slot in the cell door. They are eaten alone. Prisoners are held in extreme social and environmental iso-

lation. The average stay is six years. Some remain for decades.

Prisoners from the general prison population are placed in solitary in the SHU at the discretion of prison officials. Gang membership or activity, a perceived threat to disrupt or a serious rule violation can land a prisoner in solitary for an indeterminate sentence. To get back out into the normal prison population, a prisoner who has been "validated" by prison officials as having gang ties [tattoos, statements by other prisoners, etc] must provide information on others. The only way out is "snitch, parole or die." Providing such information puts the prisoner at risk for retaliation. Needed protective custody puts the prisoner right back into another form of solitary.

In 1989 the Mental Health Services branch of the California Department of Corrections recommended that mentally ill prisoners or those likely to have serious mental health problems be excluded from solitary. The Department ignored the recommendation.

In 1995 the conditions in the Pelican Bay SHU were challenged in *Madrid v. Gomez* (Dist. Court, ND California 1995) 889 F. Supp. 1146, the Court found that "solitary confinement is the mental equivalent of putting an asthmatic in a place with little air to breathe." It ordered isolation to stop for mentally ill or retarded prisoners, or those with a history of psychiatric problems or chronic depression. Continued solitary confinement violated the 8th Amendment prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment. Studies reviewed by the Court found that "many, if not most, of the inmates in the SHU experienced some degree of psychological trauma in reaction to their extremely restricted environmental stimulation." Isolation "massively exacerbated a previ-

ous psychiatric condition or precipitated a new one."

Studies in the USA and in Europe have for years identified a solitary induced confinement psychosis "reeking of dead end desperation and suffocating panic." Symptoms include apathy, instability, homicidal and suicidal ideation, uncontrollable anger, paranoia, hallucinations and, importantly, an increased likelihood to commit more and more violent crimes when released.

The United Nations Convention Against Torture found that long-term solitary confinement is a violation of its principles. The United States Commission on Safety and Abuse in Prisons in 2006 recommended that solitary isolation be eliminated.

The United States has five percent of the world population but 25 percent of its prisoners. In the past 30 years the incarceration rate in the US has quadrupled. Sixty "Super-Max" prisons now exist in 44 states with some version of long-term solitary confinement. Law and order ideology has trumped sensible and humane decision making at great financial and social cost to us all. Long-term solitary confinement is just the most obvious, senseless [and degrading] of our typical policy by political aggrandizement.

Terry Anderson, the former Middle East correspondent for AP, was abducted in Beirut in 1985 and held seven years in various types of solitary confinement. He described the effect as making him "...despondent and depressed....[I felt] myself disintegrating as if my brain was grinding down...there is nothing there, just a formless, gray black misery-my mind's gone dead-God help me." Extreme rendition to foreign countries may have ended, but the domestic version still survives.