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THE HIGH SECURITY UNIT, LEXINGTON FEDERAL PRISON, KENTUCKY

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SUMMARY

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A High Security Unit (HSU), built by the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBP) at Lexington Federal Prison, Kentucky, came into operation in September 1986. Initially three women convicted of politically motivated offences were held there; later they were joined by four other female prisoners. During 1987 the HSU became the focus of growing public attention and criticism.

The women prisoners could associate together at certain times of day but were isolated from all other inmates and kept in a specially controlled environment which included 24-hour camera surveillance. They were not allowed to participate in the training, rehabilitative or recreation programs provided for other long-term prisoners; correspondence and visits were restricted; and they were strip-searched whenever they left the outdoor exercise yard, which they were permitted to use only under constant supervision.

Amnesty International wrote in May 1987 to the FBP about these conditions. It referred to a 1979 study in which it had found that prisoners kept in long-term small-group isolation in the Federal Republic of Germany suffered from pathological disorders caused by their conditions of confinement. It noted that the conditions in the Lexington HSU had reportedly already begun to have a detrimental effect on one prisoner, who complained of headaches and loss of powers of concentration. Amnesty International expressed concern that confinement in the HSU was based on general security considerations rather than on the inmates' own behaviour and was apparently indefinite (all the women in the unit were serving very long prison sentences).

The FBP replied in June that the women were treated humanely and that the HSU was designed for inmates who might be subjects of rescue attempts by outside groups. Amnesty International reiterated its concern on 6 October. In a further letter in October the FBP said that some modifications to conditions in the HSU had been made and that a new high security female prison in which there would be more flexible conditions, was under construction in Marianna, Florida.

In June 1988 an Amnesty International observer attended the court hearing of a motion for a preliminary injunction requesting the immediate closure of the HSU. Lawyers for the plaintiffs (three of the seven women

prisoners) challenged regulations which they claimed allowed the transfer to the HSU of prisoners because of their political beliefs or affiliations. They also argued that the conditions in the HSU were causing the women irreparable injury. Amnesty International's observer found the HSU's conditions "deliberately and gratuitously oppressive" and concluded that there was overwhelming evidence that the prisoners had deteriorated physically and psychologically during their custody there. He recommended that the HSU should be closed forthwith, and that conditions in the new Florida unit should not replicate those in the HSU. His report was sent to the Director of the FBP on 14 July 1988.

On 15 July 1988 Federal District Judge Barrington Parker ruled that the FBP had violated the prisoners' First Amendment right to freedom of speech, association and expression because they had been held in the HSU on account of their political beliefs, and ordered them to be transferred into the general prison population. He did not find the general conditions in the HSU to be in breach of the Constitution, but said that the prisoners' treatment "skirted elemental standards of human decency" and warned the FBP to be careful that conditions at the new Florida unit "do not lead to wanton and unnecessary infliction of psychological pain."

Amnesty International considers that the conditions of confinement and the transfer of prisoners to the HSU on the basis of their political beliefs constitute "cruel, inhuman and degrading" treatment in contravention of Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The prolonged isolation of the prisoners, the humiliating strip-searches and the additional restrictions imposed on them had a detrimental effect on their physical and mental health.

This document describes the developments in the HSU regime and summarizes the Federal District Judge's ruling in July 1988. Appended is Amnesty International's correspondence with the FBP, the latter's replies, and the Amnesty International observer's report of the court hearing in June 1988.

This summarizes a 38-page document, USA: The High Security Unit, Lexington Federal Prison, Kentucky, (AI Index: AMR 51/34/88), issued by Amnesty International in August, 1988. Anyone wanting further details should consult the full document.

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