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Does the U.S. abuse human rights?

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Abstract:

Human rights groups maintain that police brutality and poor conditions in many prisons are a serious human rights problem in the US. Amnesty International has launched a campaign to end abuses, and the United Nations has sent an investigator to the US.

Full Text:

Rights groups say the U.S. doesn't practice what it preaches. Nonsense, the U.S. says.

Haitian immigrant Abner Louima lived quietly and without trouble in his adopted homeland. The 30-year-old electrical engineer never broke the law. He never had an argument with a neighbor or a run-in on the street. Yet one muggy night in August, during a melee outside a night club, he was picked up by the police, taken to a station house, interrogated, and savagely beaten and tortured. The officers allegedly shoved the handle of a toilet plunger into Louima's rectum and mouth.

Louima doesn't live in China, Bosnia, or Rwanda. He lives in Brooklyn, New York. And the men who beat him were members of New York City's police force.

The incident gained widespread national and international attention. And it prompted many people to ask a challenging question--one unthinkable not so long ago: Does the United States have a human rights problem?

For years, the U.S. has championed human rights in other countries--notably, China and Cuba. And every year, thousands of Americans protest on behalf of political prisoners overseas. But increasing incidents of police brutality and tales of brutal prison conditions in this country have led Amnesty International (AI) to launch a human rights campaign directed at the U.S.

The United Nations has even sent a special human rights monitor to investigate rights violations here. He recently issued a report that criticized the U.S. legal system for violating international human rights standards in some cases.

To many, if not most Americans, the idea that a democracy like the U.S. is a human rights violator is preposterous. Senator Jesse Helms (A-North Carolina), for example, calls the UN report an "outrageous accusation" and "an absurd charade." "Is this man confusing the United States with some other country?" Senator Helms fumed in a letter to the UN, "or is this an international insult to the United States and to our nation's legal system?"

But human rights monitors say the UN may be on to something. "We have severe human rights problems in the United States," says Allyson Collins, of Human Rights Watch, an organization that has examined alleged rights' violations in U.S. courts and prisons.

"It's very hard to lecture China on human rights when you're the world's leader in executing juveniles," argues Stephen Bright of the Southern Center for Human Rights. "There are only five countries in the world that execute people under 18--the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, and Iran. We don't usually like to lump ourselves in with those countries."

Here are three issues that are under scrutiny by human rights groups.

Police Brutality

One year before the Louima beating, AI issued a report on police brutality in the New York City Police Department. "In many of the 90 cases 5 [of alleged brutality] examined, inter- 5 national standards as well as U.S. law and police guidelines prohibiting torture and cruel or inhumane treatment appear to have been violated with impunity," the report says.

Police officials flatly reject AI's charges. "The report is not accurate," says Lt. Dennis Zerillo of the police commissioner's office. "It's

purely anecdotal. The New York City Police Department and its commissioner will not tolerate any instances of brutality."

But similar accusations of brutality have been made against the police in other cities--Los Angeles and Houston, for example. Critics of the accusers say, however, that the individual actions of some police officers should not be equated with statesponsored terrorism.

"Is this sanctioned by the government? The answer to that is no," Gare Smith, the U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy and Human Rights, told UPDATE. "Wherever possible, we send police officers who violate someone's civil rights to jail. There are individual bad apples and those bad apples will be culled out."

Collins counters: "It doesn't matter what laws are on the books. When unofficial misconduct is consistently committed, when there's widespread abuse over long periods of time, the U.S. has an obligation to stop it."

Behind Bars

Human rights groups also paint a bleak picture of prison conditions for illegal immigrants. Immigration detention centers--where people who have entered the U.S. illegally or are claiming political asylum are detained--have horrible records of physical abuse and poor conditions, according to Human Rights Watch. The group recently brought out a report on the issue.

The report says women immigrants are often subjected to sexual abuse and have to trade sex for privileges in jail. It also condemns the U.S. Immigration Service's treatment of immigrant children. It found that children were routinely denied legal representation, were forced to sign documents in languages they didn't speak, and were subjected to inhumane living conditions.

Jack Martin of the Foundation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) says such reports are exaggerated. "I've seen these facilities and I know how much emphasis is placed on fair treatment for minors. America has bent over backwards to meet a very liberal definition of [immigrant] rights."

The Death Penalty

No issue in America may be as controversial as the death penalty. But for rights activists, the controversy is not over whether capital punishment deters crime, but whether it inherently violates human rights.

"Life is the most fundamental human right there is," says Stephen Bright. "The death penalty is like torture--it's beyond the pale. Most people say it's not right to cut a thief's fingers off. But it's OK to cut off their head?"

The number of executions in the U.S. has risen sharply in recent years even as "more and more countries are abolishing the death penalty," says Lisa Bartle of the Death Penalty Information Center. "Only in the U.S. is it increasing."

Diane Clements of Justice For All, a pro-death penalty group responds, "If 40 murderers are executed in a year when there were 15,000 murders, that's not a disproportionate use of capital punishment. Where's the human rights problem?"

U.S. officials do not contend that there are no problems at all. "The U.S. isn't perfect," says the State Department's Smith. "But you would be hard pressed to come up with a country that has a better human rights record than we do."

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