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NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO STOP CONTROL UNIT PRISONS

HEARINGS ON CONTROL UNIT PRISONS IN THE NORTHEAST

While the specific conditions in these SENSORY DEPRIVATION control unit prisons may vary, the goal of these units is to DISABLE PRISONERS through SPIRITUAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, and/or PHYSICAL BREAKDOWN by means of LONG-TERM ISOLATION

What:

live testimony from families, lawyers, activists

The International Art and Writings Against the Death Penalty exhibit

rap artists

videos about control units

When:

Saturday, April 27, 1996

10 am - 4:30 pm

Where:

Meeting House

Friends Center

1501 Cherry Street

Philadelphia, PA 19102

For information please contact

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STATEMENT OF BONNIE KERNESS ON THE "HISTORY OF CONTROL UNITS" at
the Northeast Regional Hearings on Control Units - April 27, 1996

The American Friends Service Committee, an organized expression of the values of Quakers, has carried on programs on criminal justice issues since 1947. Over these years, we have seen a frightening and counterproductive increase in reliance on repression against human beings who are locked away out of the sight and mind of the public, the media and even those officials who decisions put them in prison. Perhaps the most frightening expression of this repression is the steady growth of control units.

A control unit is a prison within a prison. It is a place where people are placed not for what they have done, but rather for who they are and what they believe. While specific conditions in control units may vary, the goal of these units is to disable prisoners through spiritual, psychological, and/or physical breakdown. This goal is accomplished through a number of measures including arbitrary placement. In New Jersey's Management Control Unit for example, there is no entrance criteria nor is there an exit criteria. In other words, no official reason is given about why you are placed in this isolation unit, nor is there any way for you to "earn" your way out. Along with arbitrary placement, a control unit is marked by years of isolation from both the prison and outside communities while being housed in solitary or small group isolation. People in those units often spend 23 to 24 hours a day in complete sensory deprivation, often describing the silence as eerie. Physical and mental torture are common through such means as humiliating anal probes, hog-tying, beatings after restraint, enforced idleness, mail tampering, censorship of ethnic or political literature, use of strip searches and so on.

The use of solitary confinement in U. S. prisons began in 1829 and it soon became evident that people in isolation often suffer mental breakdown. Thus, the general practice of isolation in U. S. prisons was abandoned soon after. However, it was maintained as a means of control and has been deliberately used to break people identified as the "worst of the worst". The Federal government has justified its building of the new isolation penitentiary in Florence, Colorado by stating that it houses the "most predatory" of U.S. prisoners. As you will hear today, this is a lie.

The history of control units really can't be told as one history. It is the history of the development of these units which stem directly from the brain-washing techniques used during the Korean War. It is also the history of the men and women housed in these units, most of whom are clearly neither "predatory" nor the "worst of the worst", as the government claims. It is also the history of the families and loved ones of those who are imprisoned in isolation, and finally it is the history of lawyers and human rights advocates like myself, who are on the receiving end of the poignant letters and telephone calls which are a desperate attempt to describe the undescrivable.

The development of control units can be traced to the tumultuous years of the civil rights movement, the Viet Nam war and the prisoners' rights movement. By 1974, both the Federal prison in Marion, Illinois and the California Department of Corrections had isolation sections called control units. In New Jersey, for example, the Warden of Trenton State Prison visited and studied the control unit in California in 1974, and by 1975 New Jersey had opened it's own version which is called the Management Control Unit. A little later you'll hear a description of the conditions in that unit in a tape made by Sundiata Acoli who was one of the first people placed in the MCU. In 1983, after two guards were killed by prisoners in the Marion, Illinois Federal high security prison, the warden of Marion declared a state of emergency and instituted a lock down, or solitary confinement for all prisoners. That lock down at Marion continued for years. Last year, the Federal Bureau of Prisons opened a new state-of-the-Art isolation prison in Florence, Colorado. You will find a stunning testimony on the conditions that Ray Luc Levassuer endures in that prison on the information table. As of 1996, more than 40 control units or control unit prisons have opened across the country to the point where Human Rights Watch concluded in its 1991 report on "Prison Conditions in the United States" that: "Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the human rights situation in US prisons is a trend we observed that could be labeled 'Marionization'.....the confinement....is administered by prison officials without independent supervision and leads to a situation in which inmates may in fact be sentenced twice; once by the court to a certain period of imprisonment; and the second time, by the prison administration, to particularly harsh conditions. This second sentencing is open-ended - limited only by the overall length of an inmates sentence - and is imposed without the benefit of counsel."

In recent years, those of us who have been monitoring the rapid growth of these units have seen not only the proliferation of control unit prisons, but a duplication of questionable conditions. Throughout the country, for instance, when a control unit prisoner leaves their isolation cage, they are strip searched, even when there is no contact with anyone but prison staff. That they are also hand-cuffed and held in restraints for intra-prison hearings is one example of the punitive measures. Oscar Lopez, a Puerto Rican political prisoner reported being searched rectally three times going to a window visit, and three times returning. At the time, Oscar hadn't been in the direct company of

another human being for months. In January, 1996 the United Nations Commission on Human Rights came out with a report on the "Question of the human rights of persons subjected to detention or imprisonment". It is no surprise that the report included many documented instances of various forms of brutality and torture in United States prisons, and specifically drew attention to the infamous control unit of Pelican Bay prison in California.

When we speak of the history of control units, we also have to reflect on people such as Ojore Lutalo who's testimony will be read later, who is entering his 11th year in a control unit. Ojore represents the thousands of people who have been placed in these sensory deprivation cells based on who they are and what they believe. Throughout the country, we see in these units former members of the Black Panthers, former members of Black Liberation Army formations, Islamic militants, Puerto Ricans fighting on behalf of independence, members of the American Indian Movement, jail house lawyers and prison activists. Hardly the "most predatory" prisoners, as the government would have us believe. The history of control units is unalterably entwined in the history of those who have opposed the social policies of this government. In 1978, Andrew Young, stated that US prisons held "hundred, maybe thousands of people I would categorize as political prisoners". The outcry from the government was deafening and Mr. Young was forced to retract his statement. The government, however, has acknowledged developing an intelligence program called COINTELPRO which had as its objective the crippling of the Black Panther Party and other radical forces in the 60's and 70's, and it is no accident that the advent of control units parallels the use of COINTELPRO by government forces.

As we speak of the history of control units, we must also recognize the long and arduous struggle that having a family member in a control unit brings. Long term isolation is torture and people's personalities undergo change as a result. In his testimony regarding the isolation prison in California, Dr. Stuart Grassian speaks at length about the psychiatric harm that can come to people subjected to long term isolation. He talks about interviewing people who begin to cut themselves just so that they can "feel" something. He speaks of a progressive inability to tolerate ordinary stimulation. I remember one control unit prisoner being transferred to a punishment unit for an infraction. He told me that he was having so much trouble getting used to "all the people there". When I asked how many people he was talking about, he said 36. Dr. Grassian also speaks of the panic attacks that those of us in touch with people living in these conditions frequently hear about. Isolation has been documented as a cause of paranoia, problems with impulse control, extreme motor restlessness, delusions, suspiciousness, confusion, and depression. For those of us who have frequent contact with control unit prisoners, none of this is any surprise. We know first hand of the irritability of those loved ones living in control units. Visiting someone in a control unit brings its own difficulties with family members often enduring rough treatment, searches and delayed visits. I have counselled countless family members on how to deal with someone who is enduring this form of torment. I have also treated a number of ex-control unit prisoners, many of whom

come out with symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress. Unfortunately, is it a heartbreaking reality that many family relationships break up over the stresses which living in malignant isolation brings.

The history of advocates and lawyers is also relevant. I have been a human rights advocate for over 20 years, spending the last ten trying to raise the control unit issue to the public light. You'll hear testimony from other advocates, including human rights attorneys about the frustration of trying to correct these profound human rights violations. Advocates became so concerned that in 1994 we gathered here at the Friends Center to form a National Campaign to Stop Control Unit Prisons. These Hearings are a product of the work of the National Campaign and are occurring simultaneously in a number of places in the country.

Control units are clearly punishment, and arguably torture. They embody the central threat to human rights that the constitution was intended to check - arbitrary State power. And it is the growing use of that arbitrary State power which is so frightening to me. The treatment and surveillance that control unit prisoners endure is worse than inhumane. It is physical and psychological torture. If we dig deeper into the existence of such practices, the political function they serve is inescapable. Police, the courts and the prison system all serve as social control mechanisms.

Prisons reflect both the structure of a society and the nature of the struggle against that structure. Many of the men and women living in the control units are visionaries for a more just, humane and non-racist society. For the most part, they are political dissidents, prison activists and jail house lawyers. I believe that the government has attempted to build a wall of silence around them. Not surprisingly those of us that speak out on their behalf often find ourselves under some form of government surveillance. The overall situation in the country in terms of the growth of control units, the conditions in them and the number of people being caged in isolation/sensory deprivation is worsening.

I want to read you something from a memorandum written by the Investigative Services Unit at Pelican Bay State Prison, a control unit prison in California. In it they are reviewing a prisoners central file, and they comment, "this memorandum refers to subjects correspondence with Bonnie Kerness who acts as a mail drop for prisoners and militant organizations throughout the United States. The Prison News Service...organized by Bonnie Kerness, has since been identified as the newsletter for the Black Guerrilla Family..." That memo goes on for 3 pages with its mistruths and distortions....my point being, if we don't do something now, they may be coming for any one of us who dissents politically. I have come to believe that the politics of the police, the courts, the politics of the prison system and the politics of the control unit, is the politics of social control - and it affects every one of us in ways that are a call to action. The criminal justice systems that operate these places need to examine their ability to continue to function as they have been functioning. Congress needs to exercise its

oversight authority over the Bureau of Prisons. Above all, though, the public itself needs to recognize that we are all "wardens" in some sense and we have a responsibility to gain the facts and act on the knowledge that we gain. We are hoping that these Hearings contribute.

Thank you.