

For immediate release 30 January 2009

INQUEST OPENS INTO FIRE CELL DEATH AT HMP DURHAM

10.00am Monday 2 February 2009

Before HM Coroner for County Durham Andrew Tweddle

Sitting at Chester-le-street Magistrates Court, Newcastle Road, Chester-le-street,
Co. Durham DH3 3UA

The inquest into the death of 23 year old black prisoner Anthony Mola will open on 2 February 2009. The hearing is expected to last five weeks. Anthony died of carbon monoxide poisoning due to smoke inhalation on 15 June 2005 after starting a fire in his cell on the segregation unit in HMP Durham.

Anthony, who suffered from schizophrenia, had been remanded to Durham Prison on 13 June 2005. On arrival he exhibited signs of disturbed behaviour and was placed in Health Care under the suicide and self harm monitoring system (F2052SH). However, the next day he was taken to the segregation unit after damaging his cell and placed in a safer cell with CCTV and cardboard furniture. He remained on an open F2052SH form with hourly observations and his disturbed behaviour continued.

On the morning of 15 June smoke was seen coming from Anthony's cell. Although the fire was detected almost immediately and the fire brigade called, there was a delay before his cell door was opened. When prison officers entered the cell they found Anthony hiding under his bed. Anthony was transferred to hospital where he later died.

Eight prison officers were also taken to hospital suffering the effects of smoke inhalation.

The family's main areas of concern which they hope the inquest will examine are:

- Why was he placed in a cell containing cardboard furniture and allowed a lighter when Anthony had convictions for arson and had previously set fire to materials whilst in prison.
- The way fire safety is managed within the Prison Service and more particularly HMP Durham and why there was a delay before the fire service were able to enter the cell.
- Why staff did not complete a risk assessment as required before placing Anthony in a cell with cardboard furniture.
- Whether Anthony received appropriate care for his mental health problems in HMP Durham.

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The family are being represented INQUEST Lawyers Group members barrister Peter Wilcock from Tooks Chambers instructed by Fiona Borrill of Lester Morrill Solicitors

Notes to Editors

INQUEST is the only non-governmental organisation in England and Wales that works directly with the families of those who die in custody. It provides an independent free legal and advice service to bereaved people on inquest procedures and their rights in the coroner's courts and conducts policy work on the issues arising.

INQUEST is campaigning to ensure that the Coroners and Justice Bill 2009 results in fundamental reform of an inquest system currently hampered by delay, inconsistency of approach and lack of resources and unable to fulfil its vital function of preventing unnecessary deaths.

The government must also make changes to ensure that bereaved families can participate effectively in inquest hearings by having equal access, alongside the police and Prison Service, to non means-tested public funding for their legal representation.

Further Information	
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