

Susanville

Crisis Blamed On Racism, Poor Detention Facilities

"The greatest caution and conservative judgment must be exercised when using firearms . . . In institutions, firearms are to be used only when absolutely necessary to prevent escapes, assaults or disorders."

—Department of Corrections
Director's Rule 3276

By SIGRID BATHEN
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An obscure, usually placid prison — far from urban crime centers and Sacramento politics — has suddenly been thrust into the headlines by a critical state report which says prison staff used "unjustified" force and gunfire to halt a peaceful inmate protest.

In a 22-page report on a Feb. 12 incident at the California Correctional Center in Susanville, a 13-member investigative team taken from the top ranks of state prison administration said officers fired as many as 117 shots — 46 of them at inhabited buildings — and used more "physical force" against inmates than was necessary.

Ten inmates were injured — three by gunfire — when officers opened fire on inmate dormitories and moved in with riot sticks to halt a peaceful inmate work stoppage called Feb. 9 to protest prison policies.

State prison director Jerry Enomoto says "about a dozen" officers and administrators will be disciplined in actions ranging from suspensions and demotions to reprimands. He said there will be no dismissals.

A measure of how volatile the situation at Susanville has been since the report was issued last week is the fact Enomoto and his top aides were at the prison most of the week — as were officials of the three employe groups representing prison staff.

Employe organizations talked of various "work sanctions" against prisons statewide, and there were rumblings of a possible strike of employes at Susanville and elsewhere throughout the system.

Central to the Susanville crisis are the same issues which have always pitted American prison administrators, employes and inmates against each other: the authority and responsibility of prison staff to control inmates and protect the public vs. the basic human rights of prisoners to be treated fairly and humanely.

In California, which has one of the largest prison systems in the world,

Analysis

more than half the inmates are blacks or Chicanos. Nearly all are poor.

Susanville is no exception. According to corrections statistics, nearly two-thirds of the 930 inmates are minorities; nearly all are from urban backgrounds. By contrast, the staff is drawn primarily from the rural mountain area surrounding the Lassen County institution. And fewer than one-eighth of the staff members are minorities.

In the late 1960s, then-state prison director Ray Procnier announced his intention to end racism in the California prisons. Most prison employes are white. Since many prisons are located in rural areas, far from urban centers populated by minorities, the prison staffs are frequently from rural backgrounds, mostly white, with little or no understanding of minority cultures or life in urban ghettos. Many of the inmates, of course, come from those ghettos.

The probability of tension between these two disparate groups is inescapable.

Under the policy begun by

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Susanville

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Procunier and continued by Enomoto, minorities now comprise close to 26 per cent of California prison staff. In rural areas like Susanville, however, the percentage is much lower.

For smooth and efficient prison operation, federal Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) standards say minorities should comprise at least 36 per cent of prison staffs by 1979.

Along with the push for more minorities, there have been efforts by women to be allowed something other than clerical jobs in prison administration buildings. Caught in the middle were white males who already worked for prisons, or wanted to.

In the rural prisons, where generations of families have often worked, tensions were particularly acute. There were usually no nearby minority communities from which to draw prison staffs, and the minorities who came from other areas to work found they were not always welcomed. There were reports of undesirable job assignments, housing discrimination, verbal and even physical abuse of minority employees. Some couldn't take it and left.

At Susanville, two white officers filed a "reverse discrimination" lawsuit against the state which was recently upheld by a Superior Court

'Correctional officers fear for their safety.'

judge. The decision is being appealed, and the outcome is expected to affect efforts to improve minority and female representation on prison staffs around the state.

In a carefully worded section of the state report on the incident at Susanville Feb. 12 — a section called "predisposing circumstances" — one confidential source in state prison administration said:

"Corrections officials have been concerned for some time about the provincialism of some staff at Susanville and about the resistance to affirmative action programs." According to that source, investigators felt both factors were involved in the Feb. 12 confrontation.



SENON PALACIOS
... Vacationing warden

Some corrections officials say many Susanville officers and administrators are "conservative" and object to what they see as a "liberalizing" of policies toward inmate rights — a liberalizing that they feel undermines prison discipline.

"There's a feeling, although sometimes it's vague, that changes in society and how prisons are run have caused a loss of control and reduced their authority," said assistant state corrections director Phil Guthrie, a member of the investigating team. "It's a very real concern, very sincere, and it's not confined to Susanville."

In an April 8 article in a California State Employees Association newspaper, the Susanville situation was described as "explosive" and the result of administrative inaction both at Susanville and in Sacramento corrections headquarters.

The article said administrators "condone" the "power" of a San Francisco-based prisoner rights organization, corrections officials — and by that alleged action have "shifted the staff's authority to the inmates."

"The situation is explosive," the article continued, "and the correctional officers fear for their safety and that of the other employees, especially when the department harasses them for taking positive action to maintain control of the institution."

Corrections officials say tension at

Guards could not handle 'nonviolent situation.'

the Susanville institution, which houses a "light security" type of prisoner, has been exacerbated in recent years by changes in the inmate population and the purpose of the institution itself. Those changes, begun about four years ago, roughly coincided with the department's minority hiring efforts.

In the section on "predisposing circumstances," the corrections team investigating the Feb. 12 incident says officers are "acutely aware" of recent changes in "the characteristics and demeanor" of inmates since the facility was changed from a minimum security institution which processed prisoners for assignment to conservation camps around the state.

There used to be 35 of those camps, where low-risk prisoners were assigned to do firefighting and other state conservation work. There are now only 19 camps run by corrections because more persons who commit minor crimes are being handled in the communities.

This shift in criminal justice policy — and a general decline in inmate population — prompted Procunier to announce that Susanville would be

closed in 1973. Residents of the community, which depends heavily on the institution for economic survival, mounted an intensive and successful campaign to keep the prison open.

As a result, corrections officials attempted to change a dormitory-style, minimally secure facility into a prison housing more serious offenders. The name was changed — from a "conservation" center to a "correctional" center — but few physical changes were made.

"You can't turn dormitories into cellblocks," commented state prison information officer Helen Atkinson.

"As a conservation center, it was populated with inmates who met camp-eligible criteria and who were therefore more compliant and stable in nature," state investigators reported. "The current population does not reflect that kind of stability

"Their general conduct, as compared to their predecessors, has served to heighten the negative attitudes of staff and to create a schism between uniformed personnel and inmates which set the stage for the work stoppage."

State prison officials say a lot of hostility remains between Susanville staff and Sacramento headquarters as a result of the 1973 closure attempt, efforts to improve the prison's minority staff ratio and related factors.

And, they say, it was in this at-

'You can't turn dormitories into cellblocks.'

mosphere that trouble began to brew between inmates and staff at the prison in February.

"Into this adversarial climate was recently introduced an effort by the Susanville administration to better control narcotic trafficking by inmates and an attempt to upgrade the standards of cleanliness in the living units," the report continues. "It appears ... that some uniformed personnel took this opportunity to 'regain some control,' and in overzealous fashion, pursued enforcement in these two areas."

Inmates told investigators the "cleanliness" standards were being inconsistently enforced, with some officers reportedly insisting on stricter standards than others and confusing prisoners in the process. And they complained of being awakened in the middle of the night for searches.

Throughout the work stoppage and resulting prison lockdown which began Feb. 9, investigators emphasize that inmates were nonviolent and generally orderly. They say the work stoppage was nearly unanimous and cut across racial lines.

During this critical period, the institution's new superintendent, Senon Palacios, was on a five-week vacation to Mexico. A Chicano, former prison guard and departmental human relations officer who participated in efforts to add more minority staff to Susanville, Palacios reportedly isn't popular with many prison staff members.

In charge of the institution during Palacios' vacation was associate superintendent Clem Rice; second in command was associate superintendent Charles Townsend. Both have been on extended sick leave during the state investigations.

Officers involved in the incident insist they handled a potentially volatile situation properly and without undue force. They say there was a danger of inmates overpowering staff if strict controls were not imposed.

Corrections officials say that danger is always present in prison, particularly in dormitory facilities like Susanville. But, they add, there was no such imminent danger to justify firing on the dormitories or use of force against inmates.

As for prisons like Susanville — which is one of the state's newest, built in 1962 — corrections officials say the Feb. 12 incident points up why no more will be built. Dormitory-style housing causes security problems, they say, and denies inmates their privacy. And, they don't plan to build any more prisons in such remote locations, pointing to nationally suggested standards on new prison construction which recommend that prisons be no more than one hour's drive from an urban center.

"My concern," says director Enomoto of the Susanville incident, "is that the damn thing teaches us something."

Enomoto initiated the investigation of the Feb. 12 incident last month after complaints from prisoner rights groups — notably the Prisoners Union — and anonymous reports from prison staff members who felt other employees had mishandled the situation.

Corrections officials are careful to say they are not "in cahoots" with the Prisoners Union — a frequent charge by employees. They say the fact that the Prisoners Union reports on the incident coincide factually in many ways with the official state report is coincidental and the result of interviews with inmates and available evidence.

"Enomoto has made it quite clear

that he has had no discussions with anybody from the Prisoners Union about this incident," Guthrie said. "He does not intend to recognize the Prisoners Union and is in fact fighting

'It was armed rebellion against administration.'

a lawsuit they have filed against us at Soledad."

The Prisoners Union probe of the incident was conducted by Paul Comiskey, one of its staff attorneys and a Jesuit priest who teaches prison law at the University of San Francisco. In an article, "State of Siege,"

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to be published later this month in the union newspaper, he writes:

"Extensive investigation of this matter by the Prisoners Union, consisting of interviews with prisoners, free people and examination of documentary evidence has failed to disclose any reason whatsoever for the shooting except the fact the prison officials and guards didn't know how to handle a nonviolent work stoppage."

Comiskey and Prisoners Union attorney Michael Snedeker believe corrections' response to the incident is inadequate, but are reserving full comment until they have seen the report. They say the union may take legal action to encourage stronger measures against officials and guards involved in the fracas.

"Our view of the incident is that it was an armed rebellion by the staff

against the new administration, against affirmative action, against prisoner rights," Snedeker said in a telephone interview. "What happened was extraordinarily serious. It was extremely dangerous, crazy behavior, and suspensions are not proportionate to what they did."

Corrections officials disagree, and say a disciplinary action taken personally by Enomoto is serious business.

Whatever its outcome, officials say the Feb. 12 incident and subsequent investigation have shaken the state prison system more thoroughly than anything since the rash of killings of inmates and guards in the prison uprisings of the late '60s and early '70s.

This time, nobody was killed — a fact which Enomoto says is "damn lucky."