



## The Star-Ledger

### Trenton inmates threaten hunger strike

State prisoners object to treatment during and since August lockdown

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Saying the treatment they endured during a recent lockdown was "reminiscent of Abu Ghraib," New Jersey State Prison inmates threatened yesterday to stage a hunger strike next week unless the Department of Corrections addressed a list of their demands.

During a three-week lockdown in August at the maximum-security facility in Trenton, inmates were stripped to their underwear and forced to walk, with hands atop heads, through a gantlet of officers and barking, lunging dogs, according to a statement written by inmates and sent to the department, legislators and inmate advocates.

The lockdown followed the discovery of a loaded handgun inside the prison.

Yesterday, the inmates said officers mishandled and damaged inmate property and left cells "as if ravaged by a great storm" while they searched the housing unit for more contraband.

"When inmates complained about the abuses, they were yelled at and threatened with punishment," the inmates wrote.

About 1,400 inmates plan to start a hunger strike Wednesday unless "prison officials agree to discuss meaningful changes," including the resumption of recreation time, the restoration of group activities and the repeal of a ban on hardcover books, the statement said.

Corrections spokesman Matthew Schuman said he was aware of the statement and a letter sent to the prison administrator but could not discuss the allegations.

"The inmates have been talking about doing this going back as far as the lockdown, and the administration of the prison has been discussing these issues with inmate representatives," Schuman said. "It is being handled administratively, not publicly."

Inmate advocates said they have received several letters from inmates confirming much of yesterday's statement.

"I have received several letters from prisoners at the prison which have contained common elements about the duration of the lockdown, the rules of the lockdown and descriptions of the lockdown," said attorney Jean Ross of the People's Organization for Progress. "The fact that there was great despair ... was certainly reflected in the letters I received."

Steven Young, chairman of the NAACP Prison Project in New Jersey, said the statement raises serious concerns about inmate treatment.

"That's a human rights violation," said Young. "They have a right to be in humane conditions."

During a tour of the prison last week, Young said he was troubled by conditions inside the facility, parts of which are more than a century old, and the cancellation of inmate programs and activities, including a monthly meeting of inmates with members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Inmates at New Jersey State Prison have had their normal activities restricted at least three times in the past 17 months as officers searched the facility.

In May 2005, inmates had their visitations canceled and access to showers and official telephones disrupted after officers found four knives and six cell phones.

This June, inmates were confined to their cells after officers found letters from a high-ranking gang member that claimed 13 guns were "stashed" in four state prisons, including New Jersey State Prison.

The latest lockdown began Aug. 4 after officers found a loaded .32-caliber semi-automatic handgun hidden in the building. Inmates were confined to their cells for three weeks as the prison was searched. Their activities have only gradually been restored since Aug. 24.

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