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PRISONERS

Mistreatment of Prisoners Is Called Routine in U.S.

By FOX BUTTERFIELD

Physical and sexual abuse of prisoners, similar to what has been uncovered in Iraq, takes place in American prisons with little public knowledge or concern, according to corrections officials, inmates and human rights advocates.

In Pennsylvania and some other states, inmates are routinely stripped in front of other inmates before being moved to a new prison or a new unit within their prison. In Arizona, male inmates at the Maricopa County jail in Phoenix are made to wear women's pink underwear as a form of humiliation.

At Virginia's Wallens Ridge maximum security prison, new inmates have reported being forced to wear black hoods, in theory to keep them from spitting on guards, and said they were often beaten and cursed at by guards and made to crawl.

The corrections experts say that some of the worst abuses have occurred in Texas, whose prisons were under a federal consent decree during much of the time President Bush was governor because of crowding and violence by guards against inmates. Judge William Wayne Justice of Federal District Court imposed the decree after finding that guards were allowing inmate gang leaders to buy and sell other inmates as slaves for sex.

The experts also point out that the man who directed the reopening of the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq last year and trained the guards there resigned under pressure as director of the Utah Department of Corrections in 1997 after an inmate died while shackled to a restraining chair for 16 hours. The inmate, who suffered from schizophrenia, was kept naked the whole time.

The Utah official, Lane McCotter, later became an executive of a private prison company, one of whose jails was under investigation by the Justice Department when he was sent to Iraq as part of a team of prison officials, judges, prosecutors and police chiefs picked by Attorney General John Ashcroft to rebuild the country's criminal justice system.

Mr. McCotter, 63, is director of business development for Management & Training Corporation, a Utah-based firm that says it is the third-largest private prison company, operating 13 prisons. In 2003, the company's operation of the Santa Fe jail was criticized by the Justice Department and the New Mexico Department of Corrections for unsafe conditions and lack of medical care for inmates. No further action was taken.

In response to a request for an interview on Friday, Mr. McCotter said in a written statement that he had left Iraq last September, just after a ribbon-cutting ceremony to open Abu Ghraib.

"I was not involved in any aspect of the facility's operation after that time," he said.

Nationwide, during the last quarter century, over 40 state prison systems were under some form of court order, for brutality, crowding, poor food or lack of medical care, said Marc Mauer, assistant director of the Sentencing Project, a research and advocacy group in Washington that calls for alternatives to incarceration.

In a 1999 opinion, Judge Justice wrote of the situation in Texas, "Many inmates credibly testified to the existence of violence, rape and extortion in the prison system and about their own suffering from such abysmal conditions."

In a case that began in 2000, a prisoner at the Allred Unit in Wichita Falls, Tex., said he was repeatedly raped by other inmates, even after he appealed to guards for help, and was allowed by prison staff to be treated like a slave, being bought and sold by various prison gangs in different parts of the prison. The inmate, Roderick Johnson, has filed suit against the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and the case is now before the United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit in New Orleans, said Kara Gotsch, public policy coordinator for the National Prison Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, which is representing Mr. Johnson.

Asked what Mr. Bush knew about abuse in Texas prisons while he was governor, Trent Duffy, a White House spokesman, said the problems in American prisons were not comparable to the abuses exposed at Abu Ghraib.

The corrections experts are careful to say they do not know to what extent the brutality and humiliation at Abu Ghraib were intended to break the prisoners for interrogation or were just random acts.

But Chase Riveland, a former secretary of corrections in Washington State and Colorado and now a prison consultant based near Seattle, said, "In some jurisdictions in the United States there is a prison culture that tolerates violence, and it's been there a long time."

This culture has been made worse by the quadrupling of the number of prison and jail inmates to 2.1 million over the last 25 years, which has often resulted in crowding, he said. The problems have been compounded by the need to hire large numbers of inexperienced and often undertrained guards, Mr. Riveland said.

Some states have a hard time recruiting enough guards, Mr. Riveland said, particularly Arizona, where the pay is very low. "Retention in these states is a big problem and so unqualified people get promoted to be lieutenants or captains in a few months," he said.

Something like this process may have happened in Iraq, where the Americans tried to start a new prison system with undertrained military police officers from Army reserve units, Mr. Riveland suggested.

When Mr. Ashcroft announced the appointment of the team to restore Iraq's criminal justice system last year, including Mr. McCotter, he said, "Now all Iraqis can taste liberty in their native land, and we will help make that freedom permanent by assisting them to establish an equitable criminal justice system based on the rule of law and standards of basic human rights."

A Justice Department spokeswoman, Monica Goodling, did not return phone calls on Friday asking why Mr. Ashcroft had chosen Mr. McCotter even though his firm's operation of the Santa Fe jail had been

criticized by the Justice Department.

Mr. McCotter has a long background in prisons. He had been a military police officer in Vietnam and had risen to be a colonel in the Army. His last post was as warden of the Army prison at Fort Leavenworth.

After retiring from the Army, Mr. Cotter was head of the corrections departments in New Mexico and Texas before taking the job in Utah.

In Utah, in addition to the death of the mentally ill inmate, Mr. McCotter also came under criticism for hiring a prison psychiatrist whose medical license was on probation and who was accused of Medicaid fraud and writing prescriptions for drug addicts.

In an interview with an online magazine, Corrections.com, last January, Mr. McCotter recalled that of all the prisons in Iraq, Abu Ghraib "is the only place we agreed as a team was truly closest to an American prison. They had cell housing and segregation."

But 80 to 90 percent of the prison had been destroyed, so Mr. McCotter set about rebuilding it, everything from walls and toilets to handcuffs and soap. He employed 100 Iraqis who had worked in the prison under Saddam Hussein, and paid for everything with wads of cash, up to \$3 million, that he carried with him.

Another problem, Mr. McCotter quickly discovered, was that the Iraqi staff, despite some American training, quickly reverted to their old ways, "shaking down families, shaking down inmates, letting prisoners buy their way out of prison."

So the American team fired the guards and went with former Iraqi military personnel. "They didn't have any bad habits and did things exactly the way we trained them."

Mr. McCotter said he worked closely with American military police officers at the prison, but he did not give any names.

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