

PUBLIC

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Further information on UA 287/99 (AMR 51/179/99, 3 November 1999) - Fear of torture/ill-treatment and new concern: Medical concern

USA (Virginia) Perry CONNOR, white

Phillip CORDOVA, Latino, aged 42

Julian FUENTES, Latino

Joseph SAAVEDRA, Latino

Raymond TAHOD

and other inmates at Wallens Ridge State Prison

Amnesty International remains concerned for the health and safety of inmates in Virginia's supermaximum security Wallens Ridge State Prison. It is particularly concerned about the well-being of Raymond Tahod.

In court on 3 November, Perry Connor, Julian Fuentes, Joseph Saavedra and Raymond Tahod testified about the alleged abuse they and other prisoners in Wallens Ridge had suffered. The men, who were transferred from prison in New Mexico in September 1999, made their allegations by telephone from the "supermax" facility to a court hearing in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The proceedings follow a legal action brought by a fifth New Mexico inmate, Phillip Cordova, who is seeking an injunction to force his removal from Wallens Ridge. The next hearing is scheduled for 3 December.

Perry Connor testified that he was stunned up to 12 times and beaten in the groin area until he lost control of his bowels. Joseph Saavedra testified that guards beat him in his cell, and subjected him to electro-shocks with stun guns. As they testified by phone from the prison, the inmates allegedly had a stun gun held against them, as well as being shackled, handcuffed, and held on a leash by a guard. When it came to Raymond Tahod's turn to testify, he made only a minimal response.

Raymond Tahod is said to have been labeled a troublemaker by guards for an incident that occurred during the inmates' transfer to Wallens Ridge. A young inmate had suffered serious breathing difficulties and Raymond Tahod, concerned that the man might be dying, spoke out to demand that something be done (the inmate was later hospitalized). On arrival, the inmates were led off the bus one by one, with many of them allegedly beaten and/or electro-shocked with stun guns as part of their "initiation". The first ones off the bus, who included Raymond Tahod, are said to have been the most severely abused. An attorney who recently visited the prison was unable to see him, raising concern over his current mental and physical health. The attorney saw several other inmates, who made allegations of torture, ill-treatment, threats, racism and lack of medical care.

The medical records of the New Mexico inmates are said not to have been transferred to Wallens Ridge. This raises particular concern in view of the use of electro-shock weapons, which Amnesty International fears are potentially lethal against individuals with heart problems or other serious medical conditions. The organization has been told that whenever a prisoner is taken from his cell, shackled and handcuffed, he has a stun weapon held against him, increasing the risk of accidental or arbitrary activation.

The prisoners who had "contact" visits with the attorney above were made to wear electro-shock stun belts, as well as handcuffs and shackles. There were

also several armed guards in the room. None of the inmates had been asked if they had any medical condition before being made to wear the belt (see *Cruelty in Control: The Stun Belt and other Electro-shock Equipment in Law Enforcement*, AMR 51/54/99, June 1999).

Amnesty International is also concerned by allegations relating to the use of "strap down" punishment cells in Wallens Ridge. It is claimed that prisoners who have been disciplined for alleged rule infractions have been placed in such a cell, handcuffed and strapped to a bed on their backs for 48 hours. The bed is directly under the light which is left burning the whole time (the lights are reportedly left on in all cells 24 hours a day). It is further alleged that guards have placed bets on when a prisoner will lose control of his bowels while held in this way.

Of the inmates named in this UA, Julian Fuentes is the only one who was part of a group of some 100 inmates transferred to Wallens Ridge from the privately-run Guadalupe County Correctional Facility in New Mexico after disturbances there in August (see original UA). The nine prisoners who were in the actual unit of that prison in which a guard was killed all reportedly remain in New Mexico. Those transferred to Virginia include minimum and medium security prisoners, who have reportedly been labeled "guard killers" by Wallens Ridge staff and subjected to retaliatory abuse. The other four inmates named above were transferred with others from the maximum security state-run North Unit of The Penitentiary of New Mexico in Santa Fe, for reasons which remain unclear.

FURTHER RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send faxes/express/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- expressing concern for the well-being of prisoners held in Wallens Ridge State Prison, and asking about the current health of Raymond Tahod;
- seeking assurances that all New Mexico prisoners are being protected from any form of retaliation linked to the court hearings in Santa Fe or the death of the prison guard in Santa Rosa in August;
- seeking assurances that all prisoners, including Raymond Tahod, are being granted any medical attention they require;
- noting allegations that the New Mexico prisoners' medical records have not been transferred, and expressing concern at the implications of this given the use of electro-shock weapons, whose safety is unproven;
- expressing concern about alleged abuse associated with "strap down" cells;
- calling for a full and independent investigation into the allegations of physical and psychological torture and ill-treatment in Wallens Ridge, and urging that the use of all stun weapons be suspended.

APPEALS TO:

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 Wallens Ridge State Prison
 PO Box 759, Big Stone Gap
 Virginia 24219, USA

Fax: +1 540 523 9622

Salutation: Dear Warden Young

Richard A Young
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 Department of Corrections
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Salutation: Dear Regional Director

COPIES TO:

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and to diplomatic representatives of the USA accredited to your country.

You may write letters of concern (not more than 250 words) to the editor:
Santa Fe New Mexican, 202 East Marcy, Santa Fe, NM 87501, USA. **Fax: +1 505 984 1785**

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PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 30 December 1999.