

UA 287/99

Fear of t

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 is concerned by allegations of physical and psychological abuse against inmates by guards at Wallens Ridge State Prison, a supermaximum ("supermax") security facility in the state of Virginia. While the organization is not in a position to confirm the allegations, it notes that they mirror earlier complaints at another Virginia supermax facility (see below). It believes that they should be investigated as a matter of urgency and that inmates should be protected from any retaliation by prison guards for having made the allegations.

Phillip Cordova, who was recently transferred to the supermax facility from prison in New Mexico, testified at a court hearing on 29 October 1999 that on his first day at Wallens Ridge, 25 September, while he was in restraints, guards repeatedly beat him and used electro-shock stun guns on him. At the hearing, due to resume on 3 November in the First Judicial District Court in Santa Fe, New Mexico, he has also alleged that guards simulated sodomy against him using the metal lead which is used to link prisoners' handcuffs to their leg shackles, behind their backs.

Phillip Cordova and other prisoners allege that the ill-treatment is part of the "hazing", or initiation, of new arrivals at Wallens Ridge, which opened in April 1999. They allege that guards maintain a climate of fear through arbitrary and punitive measures, including random selection of prisoners for beatings at night. They further claim that some inmates have been denied access to medical care, and that others do not request medical care for fear of reprisals. Other alleged abuses include sleep deprivation by keeping the lights on 24 hours a day, and verbal, including racist, abuse and threats of violence.

Other New Mexico inmates transferred to Wallens Ridge in September have made similar allegations of torture or ill-treatment. For example, Perry Connor has alleged that he was subjected to electro-shocks on his testicles from a stun gun, and Joseph Saavedra, Raymond Tahod and Julian Fuentes have alleged that they were beaten and/or shocked with stun guns. At least one of them has said that the electro-shocks caused him uncontrollable defecation. The New Mexico Corrections Department has conducted a initial investigation into the allegations, but has not made its findings public.

Phillip Cordova is currently held in New Mexico for the court hearing. The other prisoners, including those named above, remain in Wallens Ridge. The New Mexico prisoners were among a group of about 120 inmates transferred from Guadalupe County Correctional Facility in Santa Rosa, New Mexico, following a riot there in August during which a prison guard was killed.

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Since the late 1980s, an increasing number of states have been building supermax facilities, designed for the long-term isolation of prisoners whom the authorities consider to be too dangerous or disruptive to be held in the general

population of maximum security prisons. Amnesty International recognizes that it is sometimes necessary to segregate dangerous prisoners, but is concerned that many aspects of the conditions in supermax facilities violate international standards, and in some facilities conditions constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Prisoners typically spend between 22 and 24 hours a day confined to small, solitary cells. Prolonged isolation in conditions of reduced sensory stimulation can cause severe physical and psychological damage.

In January 1999, Amnesty International wrote to the Virginia Department of Corrections about the alleged excessive use of electro-shock weapons at the other Virginia supermax facility, Red Onion State Prison, which opened in July 1998 (see *Cruelty in Control: The Stun Belt and other Electro-shock Equipment in Law Enforcement* (AMR 51/54/99, June 1999, pages 13 and 42). Inmates have allegedly been electro-shocked to intimidate new arrivals, and as punishment for minor infractions of prison rules or verbal insolence.

Amnesty International believes that the portability, ease of use and potential to inflict severe pains without leaving substantial marks on the human body, renders electro-shock stun equipment particularly open to abuse by unscrupulous law enforcement officials. It is calling for the use of all such weapons to be suspended pending the outcome of a rigorous, independent and impartial nationwide inquiry into their use and effects.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send faxes/express/airmail letters in your own words, in English or your own language, using the following guidelines:**

- expressing concern at allegations of brutality, including beatings and the arbitrary use of electro-shock stun weapons, against New Mexico prisoners recently transferred to Wallens Ridge State Prison (you may also note recent allegations by inmates at Red Onion State Prison);
- stating that the authorities are responsible for the humane confinement of all inmates, even those deemed to be dangerous or disruptive;
- calling for an immediate and independent inquiry into the allegations, and, if they are substantiated, for any officials responsible for ill-treatment or torture in violation of international standards to be brought to justice;
- seeking assurances that all prisoners will be protected from any form of ill-treatment or retaliation by guards, and have full and continuing access to medical care;
- urging the authorities to immediately suspend the use of all electro-shock stun equipment pending a full inquiry into their uses and effects.

**APPEALS TO:**

Stan Young, Warden  
 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  
 Western Regional Director  
 Department of Corrections  
 5427 Peters Creek Road, Suite 350  
 Roanoke, Virginia 24019, USA  
**Fax: +1 540 561 7056**  
**Salutation: Dear Regional Director**

Ron Angelone  
Director, Department of Corrections  
6900 Atmore Drive  
Richmond, Virginia 23225, USA  
**Fax: +1 804 674 3509**  
**Salutation: Dear Director**

**COPIES TO:**

The Honourable James Gilmore, Governor of Virginia, State Capitol, Richmond, VA 23219, USA. **Fax: +1 804 371 6351**

Robert J Perry, Secretary, Corrections Department, PO Box 27116, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87502-0116, USA. **Fax: +1 505 827 8220** (You may urge the Secretary of Corrections to make public his department's investigation).

Copies of appeals or brief letters of concern (less than 250 words) to:  
The Editor, *Albuquerque Journal*, 7777 Jefferson, NE Albuquerque, NM 87109, USA. **Fax: +1 505 823 3994. E-mail: [opinion@abqjournal.com](mailto:opinion@abqjournal.com)**  
The Editor, *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, PO Box 85333, Richmond, VA 23293, USA  
**Fax: +1 804 775 8090**

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

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 15 December 1999.