

Video reveals prison bashing in Australia

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Recent violent confrontations between police and prisoners in a Victorian custody centre have highlighted the inhuman and increasingly over-crowded conditions in many Australian prisons.

Three prisoners facing minor charges were savagely assaulted late last week at the Melbourne Custody Centre when they were placed in an exercise yard with prisoners convicted of more serious offences. One detainee, a 36-year-old man who was imprisoned because he could not pay a fine for a drink-driving offence, was in a critical condition in hospital after receiving severe head injuries, including a possible fractured skull, and a collapsed lung.

Two other men, a 27-year-old alleged drug offender and a 31 year old facing charges for failing to appear in court, were also hospitalised. No police officers intervened to break up the altercation and did not enter the yard until it had ended.

The tragic incident occurred only hours after a magistrate released security surveillance footage showing half a dozen prisoners being set upon by baton-wielding police officers in an altercation at the Custody Centre seven months earlier.

The video, initially tendered to the court to support assault charges against five prisoners, was released to the media by magistrate Catherine Lamble. She rejected prosecution requests to have the video suppressed, describing it as 'chilling and graphic in its contents'.

The footage shows police repeatedly kicking, punching and beating inmates with batons. In a rampage lasting just over one minute, some prisoners received dozens of blows to the stomach, head and face and other parts of the body. In one incident, two policemen repeatedly hit a prisoner crawling along the floor and covering his head. By the time he was dragged through a doorway, unconscious, he had been struck at least 25 times.

Photographs released by the court also showed the

extent of the injuries suffered by prisoners. Bones were broken, eyes blackened, faces scarred and backs covered with welts. Many of the prisoners were Aboriginal or Samoan. One prisoner alleged that an officer called him a 'black dog' to provoke a response.

The overcrowded cells in the custody centre--situated under the Magistrates Court and run by the Victorian police--have a notorious reputation. Prisoners are held for days and even weeks in the complex, designed only for short-term stays while prisoners await trials. In some cases, the facility is used as a jail overflow.

Civil liberties representatives have argued that growing tensions caused by substandard conditions in prisons sparked the most recent incident. It is not uncommon to have flea and lice infestations in cells. Some prison inmates can be locked in cells or inadequate sleeping dormitories for up to 20 hours without any exercise.

Amendments to the Victorian Sentencing Act last year have exacerbated the tensions. Longer jail terms and harsher sentences combined with cumulative terms for repeat offenders have increased the prison population by 15 percent. Offenders facing minor charges--such as drug and alcohol offences--are now jailed for no less than six months rather than treated through rehabilitation.

Concerns have been raised about conditions in the growing number of privately run prisons. A number of deaths have occurred in jails run by Australasian Correctional Management (ACM), a subsidiary of the American security giant Wackenhut Corporation.

ACM has operated the Arthur Gorrie Remand and Reception Centre in Queensland since 1992. Within five months of its opening there had been one death, within 14 months there were five deaths, by 1995 eight deaths. Another six prisoners have died, including four hangings and one drug overdose, at the ACM prison in Laverton, Victoria.

This trend--created by intolerable facilities combined with the draconian changes to the law--will only increase with the proposed plan to privatise the Melbourne Custody Centre by 1999. State Premier Jeff Kennett announced his plan a day after the assault at the centre and two days after the release of the video, using the horrific scenes broadcast in the media to seek to justify his moves.



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