

Top officials at New York City's Rikers Island prison resign amid brutality scandal

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1 November 2014

Amid ongoing revelations about the inhumane conditions in Rikers Island, New York's largest prison complex, three of the facility's top officials resigned this week. The prison's top uniformed official, Department Chief William Clemons, resigned, along with Joandrea Davis, Bureau Chief of Administration, and Gregory McLaughlin, Bureau Chief of Facility Operations. Clemons had been appointed by the city's Commissioner of Corrections, Joseph Ponte, himself an appointee of Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio.

The New York political establishment has been rocked over the last several months by revelations of brutality and torture, particularly directed at teenage inmates, by Department of Corrections (DOC) officers in Rikers Island.

In a series of articles earlier this year, the New York Times found that over 11 months in 2013, 129 inmates, most of whom were diagnosed as mentally ill, sustained "serious injuries" in altercations with DOC guards.

On February 5, inmate Jerome Murdough, a homeless veteran, died of heat exposure after neglect by guards, and in May Bradley Ballard, a mentally ill inmate, died after he was left alone in a cell for seven days without his medication. According to an internal report obtained by the Associated Press in March, nearly a third of inmates had suffered a blow to the head by Rikers guards from April 2012 to April 2013. The report verified 8,557 injuries in the same period among inmates.

In August, the office of US attorney Preet Bharara issued a report that found a "culture of violence" by DOC guards, particularly against teenage inmates, as well as the widespread use of solitary confinement for extended periods.

Corizon, the for-profit prison health care company that provides both mental and physical health services

at Rikers, is now being investigated in connection with four inmate deaths between 2010 and 2012. During that same period the company has been awarded two contract renewals worth tens of millions of dollars.

Clemons himself exemplifies the corruption at the highest levels of the city's prison system. In 2011, a DOC internal audit found that Clemons had "abdicated responsibility for the facility's reporting of inmate fights and failed to supervise, manage, or oversee the facility's reporting of violence statistics" while he was warden of a juvenile wing at Rikers in 2011. The New York Times reported that Clemons "said he found the spreadsheets difficult to read on his computer and could not figure out how to print them."

The audit recommended that Clemons be demoted, but the former Commissioner of Correction, Dora B. Schriro, redacted his name from the audit. Clemons was promoted several times since then. Schriro is now Emergency Services and Public Protection Commissioner in Connecticut under Democratic Governor Dannel Malloy.

Ponte, the current DOC Commissioner, said in a statement about Clemons's retirement that he "was a model of stability in a tumultuous time."

Joandrea Davis is the former head of Rikers women's prison and Clemons' sister-in-law. Gregory McLaughlin is a former warden of one of Rikers adolescent jails and was removed from his position in 2008 almost immediately after 18-year-old inmate Christopher Robinson was beaten to death by fellow inmates.

In the latest accusation of abuse by the DOC, last week 25 year-old Bishme Ayers told the Daily News that he was beaten and sodomized on July 4 at Jacobi hospital, where he had been taken for an epileptic seizure, by a Rikers guard. He was being held at Rikers

on an assault charge.

According to Ayers, the guard handcuffed one wrist to the hospital bed and tied the other wrist to the bed with a sheet. “Then he started beating me up with the (baton) on my lower body, my legs. Then all of a sudden he shoved something in my rectum.” Ayers says that he smelled alcohol on the guard’s breath.

Ayers believes that the alleged rape was retribution for a complaint against Rikers guards in 2008. Ayers has filed intent to sue the city, and his lawyer has told the media that, “There are medical records that document the event. A rape kit was done, which we believe shows physical findings consistent with something being inserted into the rectum.”

The violence and neglect at Rikers, far from being accidental or an aberration, is a part of the systemically applied policy of mass incarceration directed against the poorest sections of the working class in the US. Recently, relatives of inmates sued Madison County prisons in Alabama over the death of family members from easily treatable diseases. In Florida, the Department of Corrections is now under state and federal investigation for the deaths of over 200 inmates who have died under suspicious circumstances.

DOC SWAT teams were developed during the Giuliani Administration in 1995 for use against prisoners and recent reports have documented skyrocketing violence at Rikers under the administration of Michael Bloomberg. A finding issued earlier this month by the City Comptroller’s office found that violence at Rikers surged even as per-inmate spending increased.

The revelations of the brutality of New York’s prison system have come during the posting of cell-phone videos and a series of reports that have exposed the New York Police Department’s daily violence and widespread harassment especially of minority working class youth. The most notorious of these was the choking death of Staten Island resident Eric Garner in July, which was caught on video by a bystander. The officer who killed Garner has not been charged with any crime.

A report issued this month by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice showed a 200 percent increase arrests for misdemeanor crimes, such as marijuana possession, since 1980.



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