

Inmates riot against miserable conditions at south Texas prison

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Prisoners being held at the Willacy County Correctional Center in south Texas rioted on Friday, protesting the squalid living conditions and miserable medical care services at the for-profit prison. The prison is located in Raymondville, Texas, less than 50 miles from the Mexican border, and all of the nearly 3,000 inmates are noncitizen prisoners.

The protest began on Friday when prisoners refused to eat breakfast or report for work in protest over the horrendous medical services provided at the facility.

According to the operators of the prison, Utah-based Management and Training Corporation (MTC), prisoners “broke through” the prison’s housing structures later Friday afternoon. The inmates allegedly wielded pipes and set ablaze three of the ten 200-foot-long Kevlar tents that house the prisoners.

Local, state and federal authorities quickly surrounded the facility to prevent anyone from escaping, using tear gas to suppress the uprising. The US Bureau of Prisons (BOP) stated on Saturday that the agency is in the process of moving 2,800 inmates to nearby facilities in an attempt to “regain complete control” of the prison.

On Saturday evening, FBI spokesman Erik Vasys said that the protest “is not resolved, though we’re moving toward a peaceful resolution.”

Last June, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) issued a damning report on for-profit Criminal Alien Requirement (CAR) prisons, including Willacy. For the report, the ACLU conducted site visits to twelve CAR prisons and interviewed approximately 270 prisoners, using pseudonyms to prevent retaliation from guards.

The report found living conditions at Willacy and all other CARs to be deplorable. Willacy is the second largest of thirteen CAR prisons in the US, five of which

are located in Texas. In total, CAR prisons house more than 26,000 noncitizen prisoners. The vast majority of people held in CARs are guilty only of illegal entry or reentry into the US, while most others are in prison for minor drug offenses.

The report notes that CARs are “some of the only federal prisons operated by for-profit companies instead of being run as federal institutions by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP); they house exclusively non-citizens; and they are low-custody institutions with lesser security requirements than the medium and maximum-security institutions run directly by BOP.”

The accelerating growth of prisons since the beginning of the “War on Drugs” in the 1970s has produced enormous profits for private, for-profit prison operators, with the three corporations that own CARs reporting roughly \$4 billion in revenue in 2012 alone.

The ACLU report notes that at CARs, “Medical understaffing and extreme cost-cutting measures reportedly limit prisoners’ access to both emergency and routine medical care.” The facilities are often a great distance from prisoners’ families.

Prisoners’ access to education, legal assistance, drug treatment and work opportunities is severely limited compared to citizen prisoners in BOP-operated institutions, despite the fact that many CAR prisoners have lived in the United States for lengthy periods of time.

Nicknamed “Tent City” or “Ritmo” (a portmanteau of “Gitmo,” the nickname of Guantanamo Bay detention camp, and “Raymondville”), Willacy was originally run by MTC as an immigration detention facility under a contract with the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency from 2006-2011.

Following numerous reports of abuses, ICE removed its remaining 1,000 detainees from Willacy in 2011.

About a month later, MTC obtained a \$532-million contract through BOP to repackage the facility as a CAR prison.

At Willacy, roughly 200 prisoners are packed into each Kevlar tent, with a mere three feet of space separating each bed and no personal space whatsoever for prisoners. The report notes, “There is no privacy between beds, nor in the five bathrooms where toilets and showers are in the open with no partitions.”

The ACLU said prisoners “told us about insects and spiders that crawl in through holes in the Kevlar and bite them. They reported that their clothes are washed without detergent and mixed in the same laundry loads as mops and other cleaning equipment.”

In contrast to many prisons, where isolation units are employed strictly for punishment, at CAR facilities they are frequently used to house any surplus population when there are not enough beds in the larger housing structures. Sergio commented, “They treat us like animals.”

At Willacy, approximately 300 people, or roughly ten percent of the prison’s population, are held in extreme isolation cells, known as the Special Housing Unit (SHU), at any given time. New arrivals to the facility are often held in SHU until space opens up in one of the Kevlar tents.

The ACLU reports that “Prisoners who have been confined in the SHU report that the extreme isolation drives men to the verge of psychosis... Some prisoners reportedly attempted suicide or self-mutilation.”

Friday’s protest marks the third, and largest, protest at Willacy since 2011. In 2012, prison officials shut off the facility’s water for two days without providing any drinking water or usable toilets. When the water began to turn yellowish green, some prisoners protested, with up to 80 taken to SHU isolation cells.

In 2013, prisoners protested again after overflowing toilets leaked sewage throughout one of the prison’s tents. The ACLU writes, “Maintenance repaired the toilets later that evening, but the leaders of the strike were reportedly taken to extreme isolation as punishment.”

The ACLU report documents the types of atrocious medical care that prisoners protested against. According to the report, prisoners said that “Willacy cuts corners on medical treatment by refusing to provide any preventive dental care or teeth cleaning.

And when a prisoner has a toothache stemming from a possible cavity or infection, the only treatment Willacy will provide is extraction.”

The case of Santiago, 45, is particularly striking. Born just across the border, but raised in Texas, Santiago was deported to Mexico on drug charges, and has been in the CAR prison system since 2012 for illegal reentry into the US. Four months after arriving at Willacy, he fell drastically ill.

The ACLU writes that, “To see a doctor, he squeezed into a cell with 25 other ailing inmates and waited eight hours. Staffers denied his pleas for blood work.” Several weeks later, he was told by a visiting doctor that he has Hepatitis C. Almost two years later, at the time of the ACLU report’s release, he hadn’t received any type of treatment or advice on how to care for the disease.

In 2012, roughly 300 prisoners at another CAR prison in Natchez, Mississippi, run by the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA), rioted over inadequate access to food, severe mistreatment by guards, and deplorable medical care. That uprising led to the death of one guard and left 20 other people injured.

After that protest, Frank Smith, head of the prison watchdog Private Corrections Working Group, declared, “The big problem is CCA tries to cut corners in every possible way. They short-staff, they don’t fix equipment, and things just get more and more out of control, and that’s what leads to these riots. It’s just about maximizing short-term profits.”



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