

New York City claims reforms at Rikers amid further evidence of prisoner abuse

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New York city Mayor Bill de Blasio vowed Monday to implement minor reforms at the massive Rikers Island prison complex as part of a deal with the Obama administration aimed at ending legal proceedings relating to several highly-publicized deaths of inmates.

The Rikers prison, consisting of 10 prisons with nearly 14,000 prisoners and 9,000 correction officers, is second in size only to the massive Cook County Jail in Chicago. It is regarded as among the most brutal facilities in a US prison system that holds more inmates than any other in the world.

The reform package at the prison, the sixth such program implemented since 1990, would supposedly improve what NYC federal attorney Preet Bharara acknowledged is a “decades long culture of violence” at the facility.

Rikers made nationwide headlines in recent weeks after the suicide of Kalief Browder, a young man who had been arrested in 2010, falsely accused of petty theft and imprisoned for three years because he could not make bail.

After spending extended periods in solitary confinement, Browder was psychologically broken and committed suicide after his release in 2013. The latest settlement proposes minor changes in the regime at Rikers, to be supervised by a federal monitor appointed by the Obama administration.

The official government court filing pledges “robust requirements” for reports on the use of force by corrections officers, including an “early warning” system to identify abusive guards, the use of body cameras by the guards at the complex, and an end to solitary confinement for inmates under the age of 18. It includes restrictions on the use of force, with guards no longer allowed to hit prisoners in the head.

The Rikers settlement, the latest in a decades long

process of fruitless “reforms” at the prison, reflects growing fears within the political establishment over widespread popular outrage against the inhuman conditions that have been allowed to fester at this prison complex and elsewhere.

The office of US Attorney Bharara issued a report in August of last year, finding massive civil rights violations and “unnecessary force” by correction officers.

In December, the Justice Department announced that it would join an existing class-action lawsuit, Nunez v. the City of New York, involving 12 prisoners alleging abuse at the facility.

Mayor de Blasio’s statement on the settlement sought to minimize his own administration’s responsibility while proclaiming the deal’s modest provisions as heralding a new day for the city’s prison system.

“I appointed Commissioner Ponte to bring real change to a correctional system plagued by years of abuse and neglect,” said the mayor, referring to his appointment of Commissioner Joe Ponte as Corrections Commissioner last year.

In fact, since Ponte’s appointment in April 2014, instances of physical force by guards against prisoners jumped from 3,860 to 4,447. During that same period, serious injuries increased from 159 to 198. Individual instances of brutal abuse of prisoners continue to surface on a regular basis.

Only two weeks before the announcement of the settlement, federal attorneys announced indictments against Rikers Island guards involved in the 2012 death of 52-year-old inmate Ronald Spear. Spear, who suffered from end-stage renal disease and walked with a cane, made the fatal mistake of getting into a dispute with a guard. He was kicked repeatedly in the head while two other guards restrained him on the floor. The

assailant bent down and told Spear, “Remember that I’m the one who did this to you.”

The guards then covered up the attack and lied about the circumstances, claiming Spear had been the aggressor.

In yet another prominent case, 25-year-old inmate, Jason Echevarria died in August 2012 after ingesting a toxic detergent while being housed in a unit for mentally ill prisoners. The guard in charge at the time, a man named Pendergrass, refused to assist the prisoner despite his agonized pleas for help in the hours before he died, saying “Don’t bother me unless someone is dead.”

Echevarria was discovered dead the following morning, the chemicals having burned through parts of his mouth, throat and stomach.

Contracts with the for-profit medical provider Corizon, formerly called Prison Health Services, were repeatedly renewed by the city over a 15-year period, despite documented reports of substandard care and staffing practices that endangered prisoners. The company reportedly hired doctors and mental health workers with disciplinary records and criminal convictions.

Nearly half of the 185 personnel files of health care workers hired by Corizon showed “no evidence that Corizon conducted a candidate background investigation of any kind,” according to the *Times*. Even after losing the New York contract, Corizon will remain the largest private prison health company, in what has become a multi-billion dollar industry. Corizon currently operates in more than 50 prisons in 27 US states.

In reality, the new oversight and regulatory tweaks proposed by the city will in no way halt the savage abuses being carried out daily at Rikers. The conditions at the prison complex are the product of broader social and economic conditions.

The brutality at Rikers, though certainly undeniable, is more than a case of a few bad apples. Located only a few miles from Manhattan’s glittering skyscrapers and \$100 million-dollar penthouse apartments, the vast prison complex embodies the savage oppression and abuse of the US working class that flows necessarily from the unprecedented social inequality produced by 21st century capitalism.



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