

Illinois inmates terrorized by prison guard unit

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A class action lawsuit filed by hundreds of prisoners from four Southern Illinois state prisons against guards, wardens and other officials is going ahead after district court judge's recent decision giving the go-ahead to the questioning of state officials under oath. The lawsuit, filed in March 2014, is seeking damages for injuries stemming from cruel and unusual punishment by prison officials and an injunction prohibiting further such practices.

The lawsuit, *Ross v. Gossett*, was filed by an Illinois prisoner on behalf of hundreds of prisoners who faced similar abuse at other Southern Illinois prisons. Ross charges that in April 2014 an Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) tactical unit known as "Orange Crush" "beat, abused, and sexually humiliated the plaintiff, destroyed his property, and otherwise inflicted punishment for the sole purpose of causing humiliation and needless pain." Ross and other prisoners were also subjected to strip searches that they argue violated several provisions of the Prison Rape Elimination Act National Standards.

The lawsuit has been filed in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Illinois. The hundreds of prisoners were located at four state prisons during the time of the incidents: Menard, Illinois River, Big Muddy and Lawrence. Two hundred thirty-six prison system guards and officials have been named as defendants, including the wardens of each prison. Chicago-based firms Loevy & Loevy and Uptown People's Law Center are representing the prisoners.

Speaking to the Illinois based *Belleville News-Democrat*, Alan Mills, civil rights attorney for the Uptown People's Law Center, stated, "We get lots of complaints where two or three people say they were abused by this sort of thing, but not where it's four different prisons right in a row doing the same exact

things in each of these prisons by the same group of officers. ... The purpose of this was humiliation. There was no question that the whole point of this was to belittle, dehumanize and intimidate prisoners."

The lawsuit claims the "Orange Crush" unit traveled from prison to prison, inflicting terror and abuse as they went. Within the lawsuit are passages littered with harrowing images. In one passage, it states:

"For example, Mr. Ross and other prisoners at Illinois River were subject to: a humiliating strip search in front of female officers and orders to prisoners to touch their genitals and then use the same hand to open their mouths; painfully tight handcuffing with their palms outward; orders to march from their housing units to the gym at the facility with their heads on the backs of the prisoners ahead of them in line so that one man's genitals were in direct contact with the next man's buttocks (referred to by the Orange Crush team as 'Nuts to Butts'); violent attacks by Defendant Orange Crush Officers when prisoners broke that formation; and orders to stand in a stress position for several hours. Throughout the entire shakedown, Defendant Orange Crush Officers hurled epithets at the prisoners, chanted 'punish the inmate,' and told them that this was punishment for their sins."

If one were to read such a passage without knowing where it took place, one could easily assume this was a recounting of the sadistic, sexual humiliation meted out by US soldiers to prisoners at Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay. These abuses are torture, plain and simple.

"This is above and beyond what I've seen ever in the 35 years I've been doing this kind of work," said attorney Alan Mills. "This is part of some official policy. Higher-ups in IDOC will have to explain what in the world they were thinking when they gave these

people this kind of direction and leeway.”

Mills further stated, “What sets this case apart is that a supposedly elite unit of specially trained officers brutalized over a thousand prisoners in four different prisons, in what appears to have been an officially sanctioned campaign of verbal intimidation, sexual harassment and blatant physical abuse.”

The state-sanctioned torture of these prisoners corresponds to an ever-growing prison population. According to the ACLU, from 1978 to 2014, the American prison population rose by 408 percent, with 80,000 to 100,000 of prisoners currently being held in some form of isolated confinement. Inside and outside the prison walls, there is the ever-growing militarization and brutality of the police who, according to killedbypolice.net, killed 1,205 people last year.

In addition, police forces and prisons are increasing recruiting soldiers returning from the Iraq, Afghanistan and other battlefields where US armed forces suppressed local populations hostile to the neocolonial occupation of their countries. As the economic and social crisis in America worsens and class tensions reach a breaking point, American imperialism is increasingly bringing its brutal and sadistic methods home.



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