

EVEN THE 'WORST OF THE WORST' DESERVE SOME DIGNITY

By Jean Maclean Snyder.

Inmates who are on a hunger strike at Illinois' super-maximum security prison have found a remarkable ally: the United Nations.

The UN Committee Against Torture concluded that U.S. super-maximum security prisons are "excessively harsh." Prisoners at Downstate Tamms Correctional Center already know this; the hunger strike is due, in large part, to the barren, isolated conditions imposed on prisoners there.

At super-maximum facilities, inmates spend nearly every waking and sleeping moment in small cells staring through heavy metal mesh doors at the prison wall to glimpse the occasional guard who comes by. Inmates spend all day alone. The only time they feel a person's touch is when the leathered glove of a guard shackles their legs and handcuffs their wrists to move them outside their prison unit. They do not know why they were sent to Tamms or when they will leave. Often their stay is forever.

For some prisoners, the consequences are horrific. At Tamms, Illinois' only super-maximum security prison, some prisoners have mutilated their bodies, swallowed glass and razor blades and tried to hang themselves with torn bedding or clothes. Men hear imagined voices talking to them and see ghosts walk in their cells. They develop paranoid delusions and other psychotic symptoms.

This is why the "excessively harsh regime" of U.S. super-maximum prisons so concerned the torture committee when it reviewed America's first (and long overdue) report. Besides requiring periodic reports, the committee requires the U.S. and 118 other countries to take steps to prevent all torture within their borders. So far, the U.S. has done nothing to discourage super-maximum prisons.

When the committee issued its report on May 15, prisoners at Tamms were in their 15th day of a hunger strike. As many as 170 of Tamms' 270 prisoners had stopped eating to bring attention to their complaints. Though the number of those on strike currently hovers around 10, the protest is extraordinary--no other strike at an Illinois prison has operated on so large a scale.

Gov. George Ryan and other state officials responded to the prisoners' protest with three arguments. First, they said the complaints are trivial. Next, they said Tamms' harshness is justified because it is reserved for the state's "worst of the worst" prisoners. Finally, they asserted Tamms inmates can work their way out of the facility through good behavior.

As a lawyer who represents many prisoners there, I believe these arguments do not add up.

Conditions at Tamms are not just "spartan," as state officials contend--they are horrendous. Because Americans have looked the other way, "prolonged segregation that previously would have been deemed extraordinary and inconsistent with concepts of dignity, humanity and decency have become a corrections staple" at super-maximum prisons, according to Human Rights Watch.

These serious charges should make Illinois residents want to learn more about Tamms. Yet prison officials have made normal investigation impossible. The press and the public cannot talk to prisoners by phone. Personal visits (Tamms is 370 miles from Chicago) are confined to the official visiting room and require at least two weeks' advance notice. Prisoners are limited to one visit per day. Neither journalists, friends nor family members may bring paper and pen, a camera or a tape recorder into the room.

Second, inmates selected for Tamms are not necessarily the worst of the worst. Instead, it is suspected that many of its prisoners have been sent there in retaliation for filing lawsuits about prison policies; because serious mental illnesses cause them to be disruptive; or simply because wardens at other prisons do not like them.

The selection process is secret from the public and the prisoners: Even the prisoner has no right to know why he was sent there, let alone complain about it. In a state that has sent more innocent men to death row than it has executed, why do we unquestioningly accept the state's assertion that Tamms houses only the worst of the worst?

Third, good behavior is not a way out of Tamms. The prison has no work or educational programs or other group activities; there's almost nothing to be good at.

Our investigation shows that only about four inmates have "graduated" for good behavior since Tamms opened more than two years ago. Over the same period, as many as 20 inmates have been transferred because they succumbed to mental crises that required hospitalization. Another nine were transferred not because they were good, but because they were due to be released back into the community. Doesn't anyone have a question or two for Ryan about that?

The UN Committee Against Torture has called on the U.S. to look harder at its super-maximum prisons because conditions there may violate international standards outlawing torture. Illinois citizens should be asking questions about Tamms, too.

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