

URGENT ACTION REQUIRED

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November 1, 1995

Prisoners across the country are calling for our support and urgent action. First we provide the information we have and then we suggest actions. We hope that you will be able to implement some of these. If you do, please let us know.

Last week a series of rebellions rocked the United States Federal Prison System. Although down played by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and the media, which hardly covered the event, there has not been in history a series of rebellions like these, with at least five prisons going up within 48 hours. Although details are still sketchy, media blurbs and letters and calls from prisoners suggest the following.

In February, the highly placed and official U.S. Sentencing Commission, responding to charges of racism, recommended that sentencing for crack cocaine which sends mostly Third World people to prison, and powder cocaine which is used overwhelmingly by white people, result in similar prison terms for possession of similar amounts. Currently 5 grams of crack cocaine, which is about 10 doses and which is worth of \$225, gets a mandatory minimum of 5 years. By comparison, 500 grams of powder cocaine, which is about 5000 doses and worth about \$50,000, gets a mandatory minimum of 5 years. There is thus a 100-to-1 discrepancy in the sentencing. The Commission's recommendations become law unless Congress passes a law over-ruling the recommendations. On October 18 Congress did just that, by passing Senate Bill 1254 (which incorporated House Bill 1254) which explicitly over-rides the Sentencing Commission's recommendation to equalize penalties for crack and powder cocaine. The vote was 332 to 83 against the Sentencing Commission's recommendations. This is the first time since its creation in 1984 that a recommendation of the Commission has been rejected; 500 recommendations had previously been accepted and allowed to pass.

In response to this failure, the first federal prison, in Talladega, Alabama, went up quickly followed by prisons in Illinois, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. As well as we can determine, after Talladega the rebellions were in support of the first one and then were in refusal to return to cells to be locked down. Again, details are sketchy but at the prison in Memphis Tennessee, over 50 prisoners and guards were treated for smoke inhalation and \$5 million worth of damage was done. We don't yet have information on the damage at the other prisons. In Talladega, 12 prisoners and guards were injured. One of the fire fighters called to the scene told CNN: "It was like a war zone. There were gunshots going off and some explosions going and you had helicopters overhead." In Pennsylvania, the "model" prison in McKean went up when prisoners seized four cell blocks, lit fires, destroyed appliances, and threw furniture out the windows.

Following these rebellions almost every one of the 80 federal prisons was locked down. At some of the prisons, the lockdowns have been partially lifted; at others they persist. Prisoners and guards report that prisoners were encouraged by the calls of unity issued from the Million Man March. In fact, Jesse Jackson denounced mandatory sentencing for crack cocaine at the March. Some also suggest that tensions resulting from the OJ Simpson verdict were also a cause of the lockdown.

We just heard today that Clinton signed the Bill, thus endorsing the racist actions of congress. Nonetheless, prisoners from across the country have been calling for support. They suggest the following:

1. Write President Bill Clinton, White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave, Washington, D.C. 20500, call (202 - 456-1414) or fax (202 - 456-2883) Clinton and protest the fact that he signed the defective bill (again, it is Senate Bill #1254).
2. Call your local congress persons, get more information on the situation and how they voted, and protest the vote.
3. Write Janet Reno, Attorney General, U.S. Department of "Justice," Main Justice Building, Room 5111, 10th and Constitutional Ave, Washington, D.C. 20530 or call (202 - 514-2000) or fax (202- 514-0468) and demand that all lockdowns be lifted immediately.
4. Do the same to Kathleen Hawk, Director, BOP, 320 1st Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20534 (phone, 202 - 307-3250), (fax 202 --514-6878)
5. Find out the nearest prisons that rebelled or were locked down and call the wardens and demand that the lockdown be lifted. Tell them that you are concerned for the well-being of the prisoners.
6. Hold a demonstration or picket line at the nearest relevant site.

Remember the 46 people killed at Attica? Well, at that time no one responded during the four days when the prisoners held the yard. This is the time for us to act. If we are ever to build opposition to the prisoncrats and their torture chambers, this is the time to start. And, let us know what you do.

"We are urging President Clinton to veto Congress' action. As much as we abhor the violence and injury in the prisons, it has focused attention on a glaring inequity which has been virtually ignored. It can be changed only if we have an uprising of citizens of good will." -- Wade Henderson, lobbyist, NAACP

"Those in jail for a \$5 high are Black and Brown." -- Jesse Jackson

"President Clinton must veto a bill that is obviously racist. Powdered cocaine is the source of crack, but crack gets hit the hardest." -- Jesse Jackson

"A 1992 survey by the Sentencing Commission found that there were no whites convicted in federal court for crack cocaine in 16 states and many major American cities, including Chicago, Miami and Denver." -- Chicago Tribune, October 30, 1995

An incredible source document on this topic is the Congressional Record dated October 18, 1995, vol 141, no 161, pages H10255 - 81. These pages contain the transcript of the extraordinary debate on the bill which in turn contains lots of the facts noted above and a huge vitriolic battle between white and Black congress people. The record can be obtained from most libraries or your congress person's office.

Committee to End the Marion Lockdown
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