

Parchman riot: 4th inmate killed as violence escalates in prisons across Mississippi

Alissa Zhu, Jimmie E. Gates and Luke Ramseth, Mississippi Clarion Ledger Published 4:17 p.m. CT Jan. 2, 2020 | Updated 5:30 p.m. CT Jan. 2, 2020

In the five days since Mississippi Department of Corrections officials locked down prisons statewide after an inmate was killed, three more inmates have died and several more have been injured.

Meanwhile, more unrest appears to be brewing at the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, where an inmate was confirmed dead after a warden put out a call for help from law enforcement agencies on Thursday. A fire had been reported at a maximum-security unit.

The lockdown was prompted by what MDOC officials called a "major disturbance" on Sunday at the South Mississippi Correctional Institution (</story/news/local/2019/12/31/mississippi-prisons-lockdown-inmate-killed-smci/2782157001/>) that resulted in the death of one inmate and injuries of two others.

The lockdown is meant to keep the public, inmates and prison staff safe, MDOC officials said.

That hasn't stopped the violence. Walter Earl Gates, 25, was killed late New Year's Eve (</story/news/politics/2020/01/01/one-inmate-dead-and-several-injured-in-fight-at-parchman/2790702001/>) in an incident at Parchman that left several others injured. Early Thursday morning, Gregory Emary was pronounced dead (</story/news/local/2020/01/02/mississippi-prison-fight-1-dead-2-injured-3rd-fatal-fight-in-week/2794038001/>) at the Chickasaw County Regional Correctional Facility in Houston. Two other wounded inmates were transported to hospitals.

Sunflower County Coroner Heather Burton confirmed an additional death Thursday morning related to a "gang fight" in Unit 29 at Parchman. Burton, who received the call just before noon, declined to identify the inmate pending notification of family. She said he died of multiple stab wounds.

Candice Dobbins is the sister of 40-year-old Terrance Dobbins, who was the first inmate to die.

Dobbins said she's been warned that violence has spread.

"Now they're going to war," she said.

Dobbins said all she knows is what she's heard from inmates. MDOC officials have not answered her questions about her brother's death, Dobbins said, despite multiple messages left with the prison and MDOC central office.

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MDOC has not released much information. Officials say they are limited in what information they can provide because of the ongoing investigation and safety concerns.

The agency announced Thursday that prisons will be kept locked down. Movements of inmates is limited to only emergencies and visitation over the weekend is cancelled, the agency said in a news release

Officials are using "all available resources" to address the violence around the state, the statement said.

Law enforcement presence at Parchman

On Thursday, Sunflower County Sheriff James Haygood said the warden of Parchman sent out a call for help.

Multiple law enforcement agencies, including MDOC, Mississippi Highway Patrol and surrounding county sheriff departments, responded to the request for assistance, Haygood said.

"Everyone they could get," Haygood said of the response.

Haygood said the prison's Unit 30 was on fire, but everything had calmed down by late afternoon.

Haygood said an investigation is ongoing and "for now, everything is under control."

"Everything is so peaceful now, but we don't know about later," Haygood said.

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 Relatives of inmates speak out

Since the Clarion Ledger reported on the statewide lockdown, reporters have received an influx of messages from people who say they have first or second-hand information about the violence inside the prisons.

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 lockdown-violence-continues%2F2794482001

Some messages contain not just words, but also photos and videos that show bloody stab wounds, black and white-clad prisoners lying motionless on the floor and screenshots of frantic messages sent between inmates and their loved ones on the outside.

One woman said her son called from Parchman Thursday morning, warning her of ongoing and escalating violence.

Over the phone, she said she heard the wail of sirens and her son's screams.

The woman asked to remain unnamed because she fears her son will be retaliated against by prison officials if she is linked back to him.

Her son said two gangs are warring with each other in the prisons. The violence is exacerbated because of a staffing shortage, she said.

In her son's building at Parchman, there is only one guard who has worked many hours without a break, she said.

"I can barely breathe," the mother said. "Because there's nothing I can do. My son is in danger and there's nothing I can do. I'm afraid for his life. I don't want to be on the phone to hear my son dying or my son being stabbed to death."

Felicia Haynes said one of her relatives, who is incarcerated at Wilkinson County, has reported violent gang fights.

Haynes said her relative is safely locked in his cell for now, but fears what would happen if officers move him to another housing unit.

MDOC's assertion that "conditions at SMCI are under control" are false, said a woman whose fiance is being held at the prison in Leakesville.

"It's not under control," said the woman who asked not to be named, fearing for her fiance's safety. "(It's) mayhem, just like an all-out brawl."

Earlier on Thursday the Clarion Ledger had reached out MDOC spokeswoman Grace Fisher for a response to claims from inmates and relatives of inmates about violence.

The Clarion Ledger has not received answers to questions. The MDOC release warned media against reporting allegations about problems in the prison system.

"Reporting allegations is irresponsible and could further jeopardize the safety of officers, inmates, and the public," MDOC's statement said.

Slain inmate felt unsafe at SMCI, sister said

Dobbins said on Sunday afternoon, she started getting calls from an unfamiliar number with a Texas area code. It was stranger, who also had family incarcerated in Mississippi. Word was going around that her brother was dead, he said.

Anxious to learn more, Dobbins contacted MDOC. Later prison officials confirmed her brother's death.

Terrandance Dobbins, who was nicknamed "Boo," had been incarcerated for 22 years, his sister said.

He was serving a life sentence for a homicide in Adams County and eight years for aggravated assault in Sunflower County.

However, he always dreamed of leaving prison, Candice Dobbins said. When she visited him, he often talked about opening a salon and barbershop with her. He also dreamed of becoming a mentor to youths, to prevent them from making the same mistakes he did.

Dobbins said he told inmates who were about to be released, "Get out of this place and don't ever come back. You gotta be better, go down a different path."

Dobbins said she had been trying to get her brother transferred to a different prison. He felt unsafe at SMCI, she said.

SMCI had been on lockdown for all of 2019 due to a severe staffing shortage, MDOC officials said.

"Really the prisoners run the facilities," Dobbins said. "I know guards have to talk with inmates to keep control of other inmates."

Ben Salk, senior staff attorney at the Southern Poverty Law Center, said that's nothing new.

"When prisoners or people who are members of gangs end up playing the administrative role and running housing units, it's because of a void — a power vacuum that's created by a lack of appropriate staffing," Salk said.

Salk said unsafe conditions are the result of over-incarceration and under-funding of the system.

"Deaths and injuries and people getting hurt while in custody are the predictable and inevitable consequence that the political decisions the state of Mississippi is making The current system we have in place is not keeping anybody safe. Paired with under-staffing and under-resourcing, it's inevitable that tragic things like this are going to continue to happen."

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