

Foretold 'Uprising' Hits Underfunded Mississippi Prisons

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JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — The leader of Mississippi's underfunded prison system was pleading with lawmakers for money to hire more guards and pay them better in 2012 when he warned, "I see trouble down the road."

Christopher Epps, a longtime Mississippi Department of Corrections employee, would later go to prison himself for collecting \$1.4 million in bribes. But during budget hearings in October 2012, he said keeping salaries for guards the lowest in the nation would work only “as long as we don’t have an uprising.”

The uprising arrived last week when five inmates died at the hands of fellow prisoners and two of the state’s largest prisons were rocked by what corrections officials called “major disturbances” between gangs. Some observers called them riots.





Photo taken by an inmate at Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman shows inmates lying on the floor next to a full toilet. (Photo via AP)

Prison spokeswoman Grace Simmons Fisher said Monday she's "still awaiting verification" of how many prisoners have been injured, and officials haven't answered many other questions.

Southern Poverty Law Center spokeswoman Jen Fuson said attorneys who asked to visit their clients on Tuesday at Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman were told visits might be allowed Friday.

Now, with a new governor's inauguration approaching and a new prison chief to be selected, Mississippi leaders face choices. They could pump tens of millions more dollars into a prison budget that already strains finances in the nation's poorest state. They could try to resume stalled progress toward letting out inmates in a state with one of the world's highest incarceration rates. Or they could try to put a Band-Aid on the crisis and keep locking people up without spending more money.

Phil Bryant, Mississippi's outgoing governor, on Monday blamed gangs operating inside the prison system, saying prisons are difficult to manage "under the best of circumstances." He spoke specifically about the infamous Parchman.

"Someone asked earlier, who's responsible for what's happening at Parchman? The inmates," Bryant told reporters. "The inmates are the ones that take each other's lives. The inmates are the ones that fashion weapons out of metal."

But others say keeping prisoners safe is the state's responsibility.

"The Mississippi Department of Corrections needs to be responsible for this massacre," said Malaika Canada, a prisoner advocate whose son is imprisoned in Mississippi.

After violence Thursday, guards and state troopers marched some prisoners at Parchman into Unit 32, a cellblock closed in 2011 as part of a lawsuit settlement. In July 2007, the American Civil Liberties Union told a federal judge that Unit 32's living conditions were "as bad as anywhere in the country."

Jessica Schraub shared photos and video with The Associated Press that she says her fiancé took after he was moved into Unit 32. The photos were provided on condition of anonymity for the inmate because he took the images with a contraband cellphone. The images show water running down facility hallways and cells with no mattresses. Inmates in the video say the unit has no running water as they try to turn on a faucet and a shower, and they point to dirty cell doors and walls, describing mildew with peeling paint.

Bryant, a Republican who leaves office Jan. 14, said Monday that “inmates’ needs are being met” with adequate food, bottled water and prescription medicine as needed.

In addition to state troopers and sheriff’s deputies, Mississippi got help from Tennessee in the crisis. Dorinda Carter, spokeswoman for the Tennessee Department of Correction, said 14 members of its special operations tactical unit were sent Sunday to assist at Mississippi’s request.

Two prisoners escaped from Parchman during the disturbance. Both have been recaptured. Dillion Willams was caught Monday in a wooded area

near Rossville, Tennessee, by officers from multiple agencies.

Statistics reveal stress at the three prisons directly run by the state. At Parchman, Central Mississippi Correctional Facility in Pearl and South Mississippi Correctional Institution in Leakesville, only about half the security posts were filled in the budget year ending June 30, 2019, according to documents the Corrections Department submitted last summer to budget writers. More than 1,000 times, prison employees had to work a double shift because there was no one to take their place.

While Mississippi provides plenty of inmate alcohol and drug rehabilitation opportunities, prisons remain rife with drugs. At Central Mississippi, which in part takes in prisoners just sentenced, 72% of tests showed drugs. At South Mississippi, 30% of drug tests came back positive.

Drugs and violence at prisons that were supposed to be locked down raise questions about whether guards are involved. Some low-paid guards have been indicted for smuggling illegal drugs and cellphones to inmates. Bribes to guards may come from money extorted from prisoners' families.

Past reports have shown relatives sending cash cards after imprisoned kin were threatened.

“When they’re on lockdown, if they can’t keep people safe, we’ve got some administrative issues,” said Scott Colom, a district attorney in northeast Mississippi.

More than two-thirds of inmates leave the institutions without a high-school degree or equivalent, yet the three state-run prisons provide adult basic education slots for less than 4% of inmates. Only 241 of more than 10,000 inmates completed an adult basic education course in the year ended June 30, 2019.

Mississippi’s corrections commissioner, Pelicia Hall, has repeatedly told legislators that prisons are understaffed. State corrections officials are seeking an additional \$67 million in the budget year beginning July 1 at the three state-run prisons. That could hire 800 more guards, raise guard starting salaries from the current \$25,650 to \$30,370, and increase pay for current employees.

Officials also are requesting \$22.3 million to renovate Unit 29 at Parchman, one focus of the rioting.

Bryant has sought some increased prison funding, but not as much as \$67 million. And top legislators are recommending the opposite — that Mississippi spend even less next year than this year.

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