

The Washington Post

DISTRICT EXTRA/THURSDAY, JANUARY 29, 2004

Weapons Found in City Jail *Gun Incident Spurs Major Shakedown*

By SERGE F. KOVALESKI
Washington Post Staff Writer

The D.C. Department of Corrections says it has confiscated 19 homemade weapons and contraband items from inmates in the D.C. Jail's maximum-security wing since four detainees were shot and wounded there last month.

The search for weapons after the Dec. 20 shootings, which involved a small-caliber handgun apparently smuggled into the detention facility, was conducted during a month-long lockdown of the jail that was eased last week.

According to agency records, most of the illegal items seized from the Southwest 3 area of the jail were homemade knives, ranging in length from 5 inches to 10½ inches. One 8¼ inch knife was discovered in the light fixture of a cell. The other items included a 31-inch copper pipe and two pairs of scissors, one of them sharpened.

Corrections officials said the hunt for additional weapons in Southwest 3 was carried out using new security equipment purchased before the shootings. The recent security enhancements include a mobile X-ray machine that enables guards to find weapons hidden in mattresses, which previously have been more difficult to detect.

Odie Washington, the director of the District's corrections agency, declined to be interviewed. But in a written statement, he said shakedowns at the jail have been successful in removing weapons and contraband from the inmate population.

"We have used a progression of first utilizing frontline correctional officers. The next step is having shakedowns conducted by our ... Emergency Response Team ... specially trained in methods of contraband and weapons detection," Washington's statement said. "The last step is the use of the technology we have recently acquired to search beyond human perception."

Watchdog groups, inmate advocates and critics of the Corrections Department said that seizing the weapons and other contraband is indeed a step toward improving safety at the detention center for inmates and corrections staff.

But the observers also said it was distressing that the weapons were in the maximum-security unit in the first place. That area houses about 160 of the 2,300 to 2,400 inmates generally

held at the jail at any given time.

"It appears that it is not difficult for prisoners to make weapons while in the jail or have them smuggled in," said Philip Fornaci, executive director of the D.C. Prisoners' Legal Services Project. "It is even more absurd that these weapons were found in the maximum-security wing."

Fornaci added that security problems are not just the result of technology issues—as illustrated by the firearm used in last month's shooting.

"The gun in question should have been picked up by an old-fashioned metal detector, but apparently was not, and that would seem to indicate that the problem is more of a human and managerial problem than a technological one," Fornaci said.

District authorities believe that the four inmates had planned to shoot themselves as part of a scheme to win money from the city in a lawsuit. But lawyers for two of the men say that the shooting was an attempted hit by a fifth inmate in retribution for a drug bust at the jail several months earlier. Investigators are trying to determine how the gun got into the jail.

Douglas R. Sparks, a Washington lawyer who has represented inmates assaulted and killed in the jail, said the number of weapons seized in Southwest 3 shows that guards at the facility had not been conducting adequate shakedowns and that the security situation in that particular unit is extraordinarily dangerous.

For instance, Sparks noted, of-

ficial reports on contraband seized at the jail during 2002 reveal that corrections officers on average confiscated five to 10 weapons per month throughout the entire detention center.

"These numbers illustrate that the D.C. Jail is a facility full of armed inmates," he said. "When inmates are in fear of their lives, they will arm themselves for protection. It is cruel that inmates at the District's jail, most of whom are awaiting trial, are forced to live in these violent conditions."

In his statement, Washington said it is common for inmates to conceal weapons in various ways and then move them somewhere else once a search has taken place.

Darryl J. Madden, spokesman for the corrections agency, said the department had received approval last August to buy new equipment to help strengthen jail security. Much of the technology was being phased in before last month's shootings, he said.

Two new walk-through metal detectors have been installed at the jail, and corrections officers are being trained to use an electronic drug detection device that works by scanning surfaces.

Madden said the officers are also learning how to use digital fingerprinting equipment that eliminates the need for ink and paper. Furthermore, guards are being trained to use two new K-9 search and drug detection dogs. And Madden said the agency plans to install surveillance cameras in each of the jail's 18 housing units, as well as external cameras to monitor the facility's perimeter.