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Feds target terrorist recruiting in prisons

Security agencies seek intelligence on extremists' impact

By Mimi Hall
USA TODAY

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WASHINGTON — The federal government is working with prisons in dozens of states to improve intelligence gathering and monitoring of inmates in a stepped-up campaign to curb homegrown terrorism behind bars.

The FBI and Homeland Security are urging prison officials to do more extensive background checks on workers and volunteers who meet with inmates. And members of Congress are looking at possible reforms in prison security as a way to combat the spread of extremist Islamic beliefs.

Chief among the concerns is that radical Muslim clerics could have access to prisoners and coerce them with terrorist literature.

"It's a concern because we know that violent extremist groups will target people in prisons," said Donald Van Duyn, the FBI's counterterrorism director. "We're working to improve monitoring, improve training and increase awareness."

The intensified surveillance follows the recent arrests of people alleged to be homegrown terror suspects in London and Canada, which have raised concerns that the United States may be vulnerable to terrorism at the hands of its own citizens. British authorities in August said they broke up a conspiracy to blow up U.S.-bound airliners with liquid bombs, and Canadian officials charged 17 people in June with an al-Qaeda-inspired plot to possess 3 tons of bombmaking materials.

Homeland Security officials, who are sending investigators to prisons around the country to gather intelligence on inmate radicalization, are worried that similar plots could be hatched in U.S. prisons. "Prisons can be a breeding ground," says Charles Allen, Homeland Security's top intelligence officer.

Among the steps that the FBI and Homeland Security are urging prisons to take:

- Develop more informants and set up more intelligence units in state prison systems.

The FBI is encouraging prison systems to set up their own intelligence units and to work with local agents to share information. The bureau won't say whether it has undercover agents in the nation's prisons.

- Train more prison staff to recognize signs that prisoners are turning to extremist propaganda, sharing radical views, and attempting to convert other inmates.

- Conduct background checks on volunteers and workers to ensure extremist Muslim clerics don't have access to prisoners.

"Our concern is not with prison inmates converting to Islam," says Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, chairwoman of the Senate Homeland Security Committee. "For many converts, this religion brings the direction and purpose their lives previously lacked."

A case in California shows how some U.S. prisons have spawned converts to radical forms of Islam. Members of an extremist group robbed a dozen Los Angeles gas stations in 2005 to raise money to finance terrorist attacks on the United States.

The group's founder, Kevin James, is alleged by the FBI to have recruited members from prison. Four members of the group are awaiting trial on charges including conspiracy to levy war against the U.S. government.

"We have to wonder how many other such conspiracies are taking shape under the radar in other prisons," Collins says.

The Record

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Friend of the People It Serves

N.J. political prisoners do hard time in solitary

By Bill Sanderson
Record Staff Writer

TRENTON — Since 1986, Ojore N. Lutalo has been in solitary confinement at New Jersey State Prison, locked alone in his cell 22 to 24 hours a day. He isn't being treated this way because he broke prison rules — if he had, he would have been returned to the general prison population years ago.

Instead, in a nation that venerates freedom of thought, Lutalo is a political prisoner — one of 77 inmates segregated from other convicted criminals because prison officials fear their political and religious ideas could foment trouble.

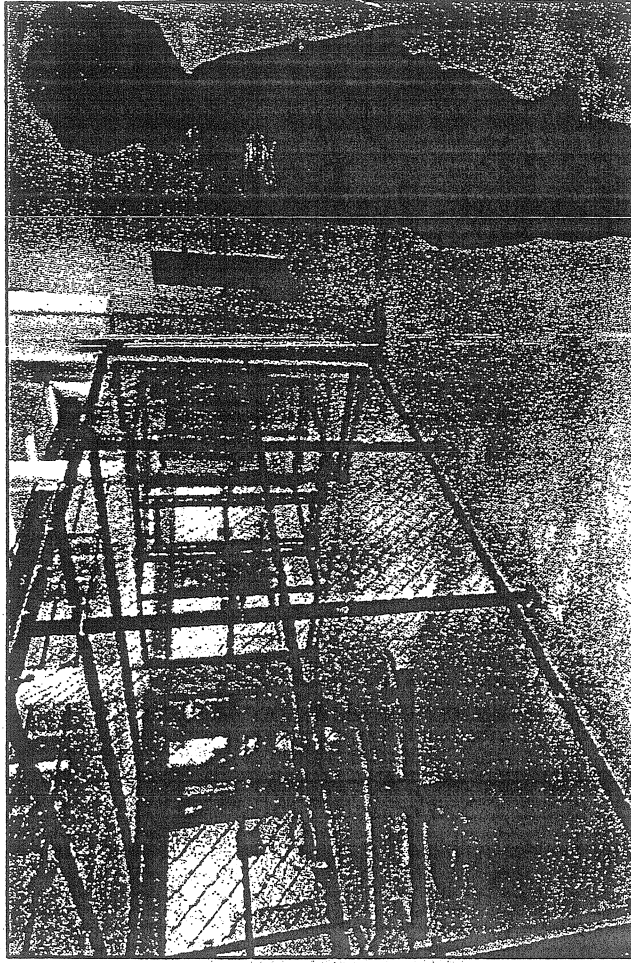
Because Lutalo broke no rules, prison officials say his placement in the management

control unit, or MCU, isn't punishment. But inmates say life is hard enough in New Jersey State, the state's most dangerous and most secure prison, without enduring the MCU's enforced isolation and idleness.

"A lot of the prisoners can't cope with the constant lockdown," said Lutalo, who is serving a 20- to 44-year sentence for a 1975 armed robbery. "They deteriorate mentally."

Inmates also complain that being in the MCU adds years to their sentences, since they can't hold prison jobs or accumulate education credits they need to win early release. Ask anyone in the prison what MCU inmates do to pass the time, and the answer

See **SOLITARY** Page A-10



CARMINE GALASSO/THE RECORD
Inmates in solitary confinement refuse to use the "cages" for recreation or meals.

THE CONTROL UNIT TREATMENT PROGRAM IS LONG-TERM PUNISHMENT UNDER THE GUISE OF WHAT IS, IN FACT, PSEUDO-SCIENTIFIC EXPERIMENTATION

for fear of radical ideologies



“ A lot of the prisoners can't cope with the constant lockdown. They deteriorate mentally. ”

— Ojore N. Lutalo,
who has been in
solitary since 1986

classes and group activities among prisoners remained curtailed.

Upset about the change in conditions, about 200 inmates met in an exercise yard to consider a protest. Though the inmates said they reached no consensus, the meeting

led prison administrators to counter the chance of further trouble by segregating their leaders.

Alan R. Hoffman, then the superintendent of the Trenton prison, said the unit was established to thwart a “minority of people who are going to stir the pot all the time.” In October 1976, the inmates lost a lawsuit challenging the fairness of the establishment of the unit when a federal judge said the MCU was a legal way to keep order in the prison.

MCUs have existed at other prisons. During the 1980s, Cubans who came to the United States in the Mariel boat lift and were later convicted of crimes were placed in MCUs in Trenton, at Bayside State Prison in Leesburg, and at East Jersey State Prison in Woodbridge because officials feared they planned violent demonstrations.

Other states have similar units, said Robert B. Levinson, special projects manager for the American Correctional Association. “This type of management of disruptive inmates is not unusual,” Levinson said.

But human rights groups are worried about the spread of “prisons within prisons” such as the MCU. Human Rights Watch, a group that monitors prison conditions around the world, calls the trend “Marionization,” after a federal prison in Illinois where more than 300 inmates live in solitary confinement.

Today, New Jersey's only MCU is at New Jersey State, a prison that houses 2,200 of the state's most troublesome inmates — those with severe mental problems, the severely ill, those considered escape risks, and those starting long prison terms. The emphasis is on security and order. After the 1990 assaults, Beyer ordered all guards to wear riot gear when they deal with groups of inmates.

The MCU's four cellblocks are of standard prison design: each has two levels of 12 cells, arranged in an L shape. The cells face a large open area with tables.

One noticeable feature is that the table area is enclosed by chain-link fencing. Beyer calls these “multipurpose activity modules.” The inmates call them cages, and they have refused to use them for group meals or recreation, which they would be allowed one or two evenings a week.

“It's degrading,” said Lumumba. “It's something for dogs.” So the inmates eat in their cells, and forgo the chance to leave the cells for socializing or playing cards or chess.

MCU inmates are allowed five hours of outdoor recreation and two visits each week. Like other inmates, they are allowed to have radios and TV sets in their cells; some have typewriters or personal computers, which they use to write political pamphlets or to prepare appeals of their convictions.

Inmates say the MCU is much quieter than other prison housing. Reading is a popular pastime. Roberts said he's had time to read books he wouldn't have gotten to outside of prison, including political tracts by Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith, as well as Sidney Sheldon novels. “Generally, the men they commit to this unit have pretty good minds,” he said.

The inmates' mail, magazines, and books are censored for ideas prison officials deem dangerous. Lutalo, who does not belong to the ANU, has had copies of *Soldier of Fortune* magazine and books on firearms and paramilitary training confiscated. Other censored materials seem more innocuous — such as an ANU pamphlet on African history, and newsletters of radical political groups.

What's wrong with segregating violent criminals on the basis of their political and religious beliefs?

“I think it is a central threat to human rights,” said Bonnie Kerness, who works in the New Jersey office of the American Friends Service Committee, the social action arm of the Quaker church. “It's arbitrary state power, and there is nothing anybody can do about it. There is something fundamentally wrong with that.”

“A good number of these guys are going to be let out, and we are going to have to deal with them,” said Bomse. “If you treat somebody like an animal, does it surprise you that he doesn't treat people like humans when he gets out of prison?”

Beyer said that since the MCU curbs violence, he is not worried about the complaints of inmate advocates. “We will keep it open and filled as long as the need is there and continues to exist,” he said. “Just like out on the street, there are a few bad apples that have to be dealt with.”