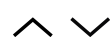




Go to



All terms 5



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< 4 of 5

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Prison officials deny cage allegations; Former inmate says prisoners

Austin American-Statesman (Texas)

October 22, 1999, Friday

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Section: Metro/State; Pg. B1

Length: 648 words

Byline: Mike Ward

Body

Texas prison officials angrily denounced as "untruthful propaganda" allegations made by a nationally broadcast television show Thursday night that femalewomen convicts at a **Gatesville** prison were abused in so-called "tiger cage" detention cells.



Prison agency spokesman Larry Todd said a federal court that has supervised Texas prisons for nearly three decades has approved the use of the portable detention cells that are designed to hold unruly inmates working in prison-owned agricultural fields.

"No inmates (have been) abused in this case with these detention cells," Todd said. "The inmate making these allegations apparently is involved in litigation against the state and has made untrue allegations against the system."

In a show called "Pros & Cons," the cable network Court TV on Thursday evening aired allegations by ex-convict Viktoria Robertson that guards locked women in the portable detention cells for hours at a time in summer heat with no water and without allowing them to use the bathroom.

"You're in a cage, out in the wilderness like an animal," Robertson was quoted as saying in a press release publicizing the show.

It labeled the use of the cells "brutal and scandalous."

Todd said the "detention trailers," as the cells are officially known, have been used since the late 1980s at prisons across Texas to detain convicts who misbehave or refuse to work on so-called "hoe squads" -- convict crews that work in prison agricultural fields.

Roughly 4 feet by 4 feet by 10 feet in size, the cells look like large boxes of steel mesh mounted on a small trailer that usually is towed into the fields behind a tractor and parked near where the crew is working.

Most of the "detention trailers" are designed to hold two or three convicts, Todd said.

While the mobile cells have been the subject of occasional convict complaints, he said their use is strictly regulated. Water and bathroom breaks must be given to the convicts held there, he said.

"We believe the detention trailer is an effective, efficient and



humane method for handling of unruly inmates who become disruptive and fail to follow direction and thereby cause a disciplinary problem," he said. "Judge (William Wayne) Justice has studied their use and believes their use is OK, and so do we."

Justice is the federal judge who has supervised Texas' prison system for years.

The press release about the Court TV show portrays another scenario:

"When women are unable to keep up with the fast pace of the regimen, or simply drop from the heat, they are thrown into the cages, often remaining handcuffed in the heat for hours, with little or no water . . . In fear of more time in the cages, many women submit **sexually** to their oppressors and are raped, molested and forced to perform sodomy on their captors."

Prison officials said that under longstanding policy, able-bodied convicts are required to work while in prison -- many of them on the "hoe squads" on prison-run farms. But the work rules prohibit any abuse.

"An offender is cooler in the trailer than out chopping weeds," Todd said. "In addition, the inmate is sitting down. The trailers are generally parked in the shade when available. Again, sitting in the trailer is easier than working."

Prison officials said they believe Robertson is one of several former prisonersconvicts who are plaintiffs in an ongoing Austin federal lawsuit alleging that a former parole officer at a **Gatesville** prison, **David Taylor**, threatened them and forced them to have sex with him. [An Austin](#) judge several weeks ago ordered the former officer to pay the women \$4.1 million.

Prison officials said they fired Taylor several years ago after an internal investigation validated their claims. Taylor faced criminal charges in the case but was acquitted in a jury trial.

Calls to Court TV the New York firm that issued the press release and Robertson were not immediately returned Thursday.



Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: PRISONERS (93%); CORRECTIONS (92%); CORRECTIONS WORKERS (92%); CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS (90%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (90%); PRISONS (90%); JUDGES (89%); NEGATIVE NEWS (89%); **SEXUAL ASSAULT** (89%); LITIGATION (78%); PRISON INDUSTRIES (78%); SEX OFFENSES (78%); APPROVALS (73%); LAW COURTS & TRIBUNALS (72%); RURAL COMMUNITIES (71%)

Company: COURT TV (67%); COURT TV (67%)

Industry: BROADCASTING INDUSTRY (90%); TELEVISION INDUSTRY (90%); TELEVISION PROGRAMMING (90%); CABLE TELEVISION (78%)

Geographic: AUSTIN, TX, USA (91%); TEXAS, USA (94%); UNITED STATES (93%)

Load-Date: November 1, 1999



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