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8 Ex-Prison Employees Charged With Abuse

TALLAHASSEE, Fla., May 9, 2007

(AP) Prosecutors issued arrest warrants Tuesday for eight former prison employees accused of abusing inmates, including forcing some to clean toilets with their tongues.

The eight were among 13 prison employees who had already been fired from the 605-inmate medium and minimum security at the Hendry Correctional Institution in the Everglades. The previous warden and an assistant warden resigned, and three other employees were reassigned after an inmate was beaten and choked by guards in March.

State prisons chief Jim McDonough said the warrants include charges of battery and failing to report inmate abuse against former guards William Thiessen, Phillip Barger, Randy Hazen, Gabriel Cotilla, Kevin Filipowicz, Ruben Ibarra and Stephen Whitney. Fired guard James Brown was charged with grand theft.

"These former employees were involved in a series of dehumanizing and degrading behaviors," McDonough said, noting that some inmates were given choices of eating their food off the floor or providing sexual favors to guards.

"We had cases where inmates were compelled under threat of force to clean a commode with their tongues," McDonough said. "These were improper, illegal heinous and despicable acts and it was done apparently in an organized and conspiratorial fashion."

None of the eight men could immediately be reached for comment Tuesday. Thiessen, Barger, Hazen and Whitney's phone numbers were unlisted. Nobody answered at a number under Ibarra's name. A number listed under Cotilla's name was connected to a fax machine, and there was not enough information to locate a number for Brown, who has a common name.

It was not known Tuesday whether any of the men had hired attorneys.

Four guards were fired two days after Sgt. Bruce Sooy noticed several fresh bruises on inmate Charles Gundlah's neck on March 14. Officials said Gundlah was removed from his cell and taken to an area out of sight of security cameras and beaten on the head and choked into unconsciousness by guards after he filed a grievance complaining about his treatment.

Gundlah is serving a life sentence for first-degree murder and Sooy has been subsequently promoted to major.

McDonough, who has spent most of his 15 months in charge of the state's massive corrections operation cleaning up one scandal after another, said the FBI and U.S. Attorney were also looking into civil rights violations.

Just two weeks ago, McDonough's predecessor as the head of Florida's prison system, James Crosby, was sentenced to eight years in prison for taking thousands of dollars in kickbacks from a prison contractor. A top Crosby aide, Allen Clark, was sentenced to 31 months in prison for his involvement.

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