

Marion Penitentiary targeted by human rights protesters

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About 250 people from nine cities and seven college campuses throughout the Midwest converged in Carbondale to protest what they view as human rights violations at Marion Penitentiary.

"We have people here who have been traveling twelve hours to get here. They've spent their own money and time because they care about justice in this country," Steve Whitman, of Chicago, said.

The demonstrators gathered at the University's free forum area in the early morning to kick off a day-long protest of inhumane conditions at the penitentiary.

The Marion Penitentiary is the only U.S. prison to be condemned by the human rights group, Amnesty International.

Built in 1963, Marion penitentiary went through re-evaluation in the late 1970s as part of a new federal system, which assigned the institution a Level 6 rating on a 1 to 6 scale. The maximum security level earned it the nickname, "the new Alcatraz."

The new designation meant Marion would become the nation's main depository for inmates with serious disciplinary problems.

Nancy Kurshan, of the

Committee to End the Marion Lockdown, described the prison as a "dungeon," where prisoners are treated "like animals in a zoo."

Kurshan said prison officials chained prisoners naked and spread-eagled to their bunks, subjecting prisoners to rectal probes and supplying prisoners with contaminated water from Crab Orchard Lake.

Randy Davis, public relations officer for the penitentiary, said while strict security measures are enforced at the institution, he denied allegations of inhumane treatment of prisoners.

"The institution as a whole is seen as harsh, but it allows other operations to function more smoothly. A lot of people's lives are saved by this place," he said.

Davis said in extreme conditions, prisoners are sometimes confined to their bunks by leather straps, but are not naked or chained down. He said the prisoners are checked every half hour and are allowed bathroom breaks.

Davis said the occasional rectal searches conducted on the prisoners for contraband materials are necessary.

"In the rectal and nasal cavities, you'll find hacksaw blades, handcuff keys, razor blades and drugs," he said.

Davis also said the penitentiary's water supply

meets government standards and is safe for human consumption.

"It (the water) is tested on a weekly basis. I drink it, the staff that lives on the ground drinks it, so obviously, we think it's safe," he said.

Kurshan also called for an end to restricted visitations. A prisoner's only contact to the outside world is through a plexiglass shield, Kurshan said.

"Prisoners are allowed no human contact," Kurshan said. "The kind of human contact that heals the soul."

The demonstrators left the free forum area about 10 a.m. and began the half-mile walk through campus and downtown Carbondale to protest in front of the Federal Building on 250 W. Cherry St.

Demonstrators chanted "Marion lockdown, we say, No. Control Units have got to go," and "Bureau of Prisons, FBI, U.S. justice is a lie."

Accompanied by a police escort, the marchers waved flags, banners and pamphlets as they filed down Walnut Street toward the Carbondale Post Office.

Julie Jones of Davenport, Iowa, said she and four friends drove all night to reach the Carbondale protest as "a matter of principle."

"We have to oppose injustices wherever we find them. That's the only way we can survive," she said.