

Infection in prison raises concern

Group says authorities hiding truth

By Larry Davis
Of The Southern Illinoisan

A group concerned about health conditions inside the U.S. Penitentiary at Marion met in Carbondale Thursday to draw attention to questions to which they say they cannot get answers.

The speakers' immediate concern is an infection detected at the prison recently, but they used their news conference to renew several other complaints about the facility.

They had traveled from the Chicago area in the hope of meeting with Warden Gary Henman. Instead they had come away from a visit to the facility dissatisfied with answers they had received from prison spokesman Randy Davis.

They were told Henman is out of the country.

The Rev. Michael Yasutake, an Episcopal priest and the director of the Prisoners of Conscience Project, said outsiders rely upon reports from inmates because prison officials and employees hide the truth about conditions inside the facility.

But Yasutake said he had meant to imply lying "in a blanket way." It is just that those seeking information about prison conditions tend to put more faith in the comments of inmates than in official pronouncements.

He called for an objective evaluation of conditions inside the prison by a qualified outside agency.

Yasutake read from a prepared statement about what he called an epidemic of parasitic disease at the prison.

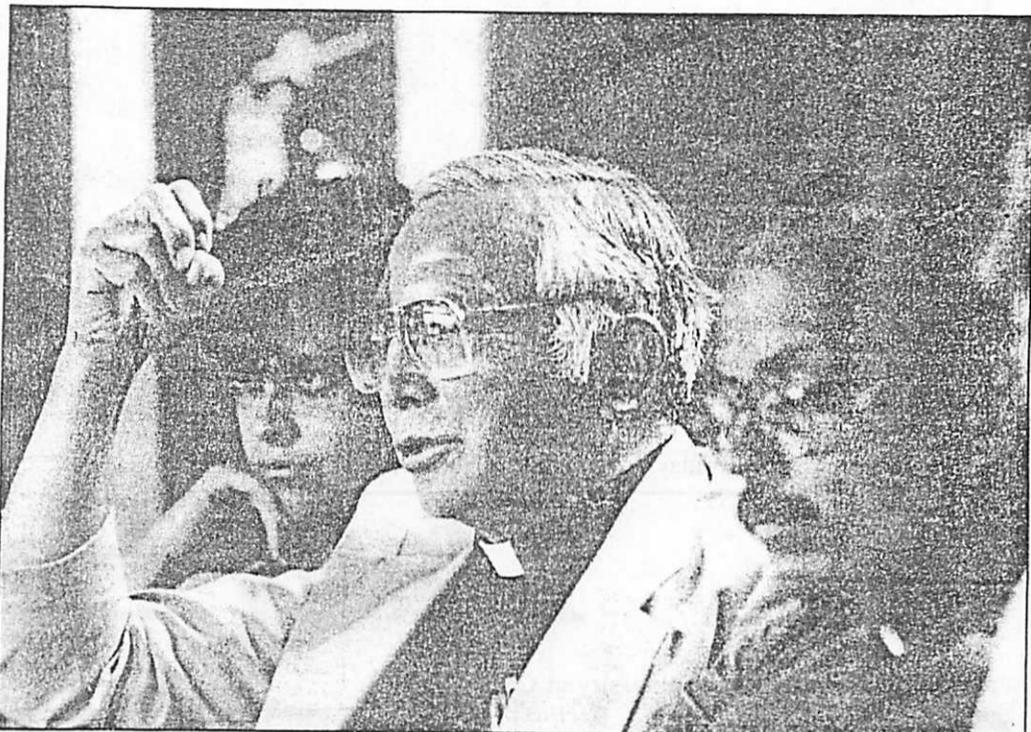
The prison health service, he said, has diagnosed several inmates as suffering from giardia lamblia, an intestinal parasite.

The parasite can be transmitted in water or food contaminated with fecal matter.

The symptoms of the illness have been compared to those of a stomach virus and can include cramps, nausea, diarrhea, fever, weight loss and weakness.

Davis was not immediately available for comment after the news conference but had issued a statement containing preliminary findings of an investigator from the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta.

The report said there is evidence



Wants answers: The Rev. Michael Yasutake (center) of the Prisoners of Conscience Project has called for an objective evaluation of conditions inside the prison by a qualified outside agency.

Southern Illinoisan photo by JAN ABBOTT

suggesting "that a low level of giardia infection exists in the prison community comparable to that which would be found in any other community of similar size."

"These data do not support the existence of an epidemic," continued the report. "However, we are continuing to collect information and will be requesting stool speci-

Lourdes Lugo of Chicago said she has seen the physical deterioration of her uncle, Oscar Lopez, during her visits to the prison. She said Lopez tested positive for giardiasis about 3½ months ago.

He was given medication for a month, but has received no more examinations, Lugo said. While she could see that he had lost weight

Project, asked why the prison's health service is not accredited by the National Commission of Correctional Health Care.

She said commission officials have told her that the lockdown at the facility would in itself make accreditation impossible.

Legion said the prison is becoming a "concentration point for political prisoners," and Lugo said her uncle, a member of a Puerto Rican independence movement, is such a political prisoner.

The Bureau of Prisons considers Lopez a convicted felon. He is serving 70 years for robbery, interstate transportation of firearms and a stolen vehicle, and attempted escape.

The Rev. Luis Quinones, a United Methodist minister, read a statement reasserting condemnation of the prison by Amnesty International for a number of alleged human rights violations.

More than one of the speakers decried the prison's use of water from Crab Orchard Lake because of contamination from polychlorinated biphenyls, toxic chemical compounds that have contaminated part of the federal refuge surrounding the lake and which have been found in some fish.

Yasutake said the health problems should be of particular concern to the community around the prison.

'These data do not support the existence of an epidemic. However, we are continuing to collect information ...'

Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta

mens from a sample of all prison residents over the next few months."

But Yasutake drew attention to a sentence in the prison statement that noted that, "The sudden disappearance of positive cases (of the giardia infection) would be distinctly uncharacteristic for any epidemic."

If the inmates don't have giardiasis, then what do they have, Yasutake asked. He said prison officials are not saying.

and had a skin rash and a bloated stomach, a prison guard would not allow her uncle to show her the condition of his legs.

The perceived lack of communications by the prison administration appears to be as great a concern as the parasite itself, which Lugo called "just the tip of the iceberg" on health conditions inside the facility.

Vicki Legion, a board member for the Prisoners of Conscience

Daily Egyptian

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

Group asks for prison inquiry

By John Walblay
Staff Writer

Members of the Prisoners of Conscience requested Thursday that a third party investigate and analyze an outbreak of sickness at the Marion Penitentiary and make a determination on the condition of the water being used at the prison.

The group held a press conference to voice concerns of alleged inhumane treatment of prisoners because of health conditions at the penitentiary.

Main concerns of the group are that the water being used at the penitentiary is from Crab Orchard Lake — water that the group claims is tainted by toxic PCB's and possibly concentrations of heavy metals. Another concern is that there is an epidemic of giardia lamblia, a parasitic disease transmitted through food and water.

Randy Davis, public relations officer for the

penitentiary, has previously claimed the water meets the standards set by the government and that the water is tested on a weekly basis.

Davis could not be reached for comment Thursday night.

The Rev. S. Michael Yasutake said that the penitentiary previously acknowledged that giardia infected some of the inmates, but he said the prison now claims the cases have been treated.

Yasutake said officials from the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta came to the penitentiary and reported that they found no evidence of an epidemic of giardia.

Lourdes Lugo of Chicago said she has visited the prison several times to visit her uncle Oscar Lopez, who Lugo said is in need of medical treatment.

Lugo said her uncle tested positive for giardia three months ago. She said he was given medication for one



Staff Photo by Ann Schluter

Lourdes Lugo, from Chicago, describes what she considers unfair conditions at Marion Federal Penitentiary Thursday at the Interfaith Center. Lugo's uncle is an inmate at the penitentiary.

month and then requested additional medication about one-and-a-half months ago, but did not receive it.

"It's not only from word-of-mouth of a prisoner that you see whether or not their health is affected or not," Lugo said.

"You see the effects at a visit, a drastic weight loss from one month to the other, a skin rash that leaves scars on the arms, inflammation of the stomach," she said.

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The group and Lourdes contends that the Marion penitentiary is being used to concentrate political prisoners, many of whom do not meet what the group claims are standards for violent tendencies or a record of escape attempts.