

Death row inmates release prison guard after 13 hours

LIVINGSTON (AP) — A female prison guard was released early Tuesday after being held hostage for nearly 13 hours by two death row inmates who demanded better living conditions and a moratorium on executions.

The inmates — who tried to escape more than a year ago — surrendered without incident shortly after 5 a.m. after being allowed to speak with a group of Houston death penalty opponents. One of the inmates faces a March 14 execution date.

Prison officials said guard Jeanette Bledsoe, 57, was not injured during the standoff, which began at 4:15 p.m. Monday. She underwent a routine examination at a prison infirmary early Tuesday.

"It was a tense situation that ended happily," Texas Department of Criminal Justice spokesman Larry Fitzgerald said.

John Bledsoe, 36, waited through an anguishing night for his mother's release.

"We were totally helpless," a sleepless Bledsoe said Tuesday morning. "We just sat at a big old table and waited for some kind of news."

Bledsoe said the warden gave the family word of his mother's release before sunrise.

"Oh, man, it was just great," he said. "Right now she's laying in there trying to get some sleep."

Deloyd Parker, executive director of the Houston-based SHAPE Community Center, said, the prisoners "wanted to bring forward issues about the conditions. Everything from crafts being taken to no mirror to shave."

"They feel like they are being executed twice," said Parker, one of the three people who visited the inmates.

The inmates also demanded a moratorium on the death penalty immediately because of what they called a lack of due process and effective counsel. They said there were a disproportionate number of minorities on death row, Parker said.

Since resumption of capital punishment in the 1980s, Texas has conducted 206 executions. Two are scheduled this week, including Betty Lou Beets, the second woman to be executed since capital punishment resumed in the 1980s.

Fitzgerald credited Texas Rangers Capt. Earl Pearson of Houston with resolving the standoff. Pearson took over negotiations helped get things resolved peacefully, Fitzgerald said.

Meanwhile, the prison was under lockdown.

Bledsoe was grabbed as she was taking one inmate back to his cell when he and another inmate overpowered her, Fitzgerald said. One inmate had somehow opened his cell door.

Ponchai Wilkerson, 28, faces a March 14 execution for the robbery and shooting of a Houston jewelry store clerk. Howard Guidry, 23, is on death row for shooting a woman in a murder-for-hire plot.

Investigators were now focusing on where Wilkerson and Guidry got the homemade knife and how the pair overcame the guard.

Officials suspect the incident may have been planned, Fitzgerald said, and security camera footage of what transpired inside the prison showed the inmates treated Bledsoe with respect during the ordeal.

With one leg shackled, Bledsoe had been seated on the floor in a small cage-like room adjacent to death row in the unit. One inmate had the makeshift knife; the other had a 2-foot long piece of metal used by Bledsoe to open the dinner door on each prison cell.

Bledsoe has been a corrections officer for 39 months. Her son, Biff, is a corrections officer at the same prison.

In talks with negotiators, Wilkerson and Guidry complained it takes six months to make changes in visitation lists.

They also want to be allowed out of their cells for longer than one hour a day. They currently are allowed to be out of their cells for one hour daily to exercise.

The standoff was the latest problem at state prisons that correctional officers blame on staff shortages, poor training and low pay.

Pump up the volume



Gary Blackwelder (l) and Gerald Boyle, both sophomore management majors, select music and adjust the tuning during their radio show, "The Speak Easy." The show features Christian punk and hardcore, and is aired on KANM 1600 AM every Tuesday afternoon from 4 to 6 p.m.

KIMBER HUFF/The Battalion

Texas forestry officials reject EPA's plan to require permits before cutting

LUFKIN (AP) — The EPA's plan to apply the 1972 Clean Water Act to the timber industry is unnecessary, some Texas forestry officials said, because voluntary programs already are effectively reducing forestry-related pollution.

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"Most tree farmers are doing an excellent job of managing their forests on their own, without the intervention of the government," said Burl Carraway, a forester for the Texas Forest Service. "A top-down, heavy-handed regulatory program can't match what we are doing with our voluntary program."

Timber interests have been up in arms about a proposal by the EPA to require tree farmers to obtain permits, in some in-

stances, before cutting timber or replanting near polluted waters.

Forestry long has been exempt from the permitting process under the Clean Water Act, falling instead under state oversight.

Several hundred land owners were expected to attend a public hearing on the issue in Lufkin on Tuesday night. Scheduled speakers include Rep. Jim Turner, D-Crockett, state and federal environmental officials and

"There is very little evidence that forestry contributes to pollution of our waterways."

— Jim Turner
Rep. D-Crockett

industry representatives.

A meeting in El Dorado, Ark. last month drew more than 1,100 farmers and loggers from Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana. About 3,000 people attended a meeting two weeks ago in Texarkana organized by Rep. Max Sandlin, D-Marshall.

Turner cosponsored legislation with Sandlin and Rep. Marion Berry, D-Ark., that would bar the EPA proposal.

"It would be extremely burdensome and it would not be cost effective," Turner said.

"There is very little evidence that forestry contributes to pollution of our waterways."

Timber is a top crop in East Texas, employing about 91,000 people statewide with an annual economic impact of \$2.3 billion, said Ron Hufford, executive vice president of the Texas Forestry Association.

He said the EPA proposal is nothing more than red tape.

"Forestry as the cause of pollutants is less than 3 percent," Hufford said. "But this would bring forestry operations under the point-source category associated with industrial discharge. It would mean permitting could be required to plant a tree, to harvest a tree, to build a road or to thin a timber stand out."

The EPA rules, which have been five years in the making, allow states to determine the level of enforcement.

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