

Prison guards will `shoot to kill' inmates to stop deadly violence of gangs

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ROSHARON - State prison officials think they have found the ultimate long-range solution to inmate gang violence - deadly force.

"If an inmate from one gang wants to stab an inmate belonging to another gang, we'll blow him away," said Keith Price, warden at the Texas Department of Corrections Darrington Unit in Brazoria County where most of the inmate gang leaders are housed. "We're prepared to use deadly force to prevent violence."

Construction of a 12-foot-high gun walk overlooking 13 outside recreation yards is under way here and should be completed by March.

Guards assigned to the post will be armed with a shotgun, a .357-caliber pistol and a gas gun. They will have the responsibility of determining if a situation requires use of the weapons. If they shoot, they'll shoot to kill, officials said.

"Whoever is going to be up there is going to be a marksman and specially trained. He's not going to be a hot dog," said assistant Warden Charles Pelz.

A similar walkway will be completed early next year at the Eastham Unit in Houston County where 415 dangerous inmates are confined to high-security cells.

Officials there are trying to decide what type of weapons to give guards who may have to make instant life-or-death decisions in case of an attack.

"We have to be careful because bullets can ricochet off the concrete. We want to stop the assailant, and at the same time save the life of the inmate being attacked," said Eastham Warden Tim West.

Building an elevated observation area at the high-security section of the Ferguson Unit in Madison County also has been discussed.

Ferguson officials are contemplating using a chemical, probably tear gas, to incapacitate inmates involved in an attack.

The projects are part of a long-range plan to control inmate violence that has cost the lives of 54 convicts since 1984. Most of the killings have been tied to well-organized inmate gangs.

Although few of the system's 26 units have escaped gang violence, nowhere have gang members been more murderous than at Darrington.

Four inmates died as a result of gang violence while West was warden here last year. One of the killings was recorded on videotape.

Five more killings took place at the unit after West was transferred, including a triple slaying that has been attributed to friction between two Hispanic gangs - the Texas Syndicate and the Mexican Mafia.

Even the constant presence of a portable television camera didn't make any difference in March 1985 when Virgil Barfield, 30, carried out an Aryan Brotherhood order to kill Calvin Massey, 21.

Massey was stabbed 42 times. Any one of four wounds to the chest area would have been enough to kill him.

The camera did aid in the prosecution of Barfield, who was recently sentenced to life in prison for the attack.

"Jurors told us that they had their minds made up after seeing that tape," said John Blankenship, a Brazoria County investigator assigned to TDC cases.

Cameras are no longer used to record everything in Darrington's high-security area because the wing housing gang members and other violent inmates has been expanded from 150 convicts last year to nearly 500 this year.

"The idea of taping everything is extremely good," said Price. "The problem is the lack of funds to buy the equipment. I suppose it'll be a reality in the future, but not for several more years." While cameras would help, TDC officials said guard education and close adherence to policy are the best ways to stay a step ahead of planned gang violence.

Rolling metal shields also have been installed in front of high-security cells to prevent the stabbing of inmates being escorted on narrow walkways.

"We even have a bilingual mailroom clerk reading gang mail," said Gary Johnson, assistant warden at the Ferguson Unit where 444 dangerous inmates are housed in single cells. "We're closely screening inmate-to-inmate mail. I don't know if the gangs are getting weaker or we're getting better."

About 1,000 gang members are now confined to administrative segregation cells system wide. Their activities are closely monitored and controlled.

Confirmed gang members now have little hope of ever returning to the general prison population. They are served meals inside their small cells and are escorted to shower at least once every two days.

They are taken to an outside recreation yard once a week and are handcuffed each time guards remove them from their cells.

Before the violence erupted, TDC officials denied the existence of inmate gangs. When it became obvious that gangs were responsible for a series of killings, officials admitted their presence but played down the gangs' importance and ability to organize.

Meanwhile, gangs continued to grow in variety, membership and power, apparently filling a gap left by the abolition of the inmate guard system, which provided convicts with a power structure and a form of society.

The violence stopped instantly in September 1985 when half of the 38,000 TDC inmates were confined to their cells as officials began to sift out gang members and place them in closely monitored areas.

There have been two inmate killings this year - one believed to be gang-related and a second stemming from an argument between convicts over the theft of property, said TDC spokesman David Nunelee.

When an assault does take place these days, it's usually because the system set up to disrupt gang activities fails or tight TDC regulations are ignored, prison officials said.

A recent stabbing could have been prevented by Darrington guards who failed to find a knife hidden in a small, makeshift pocket inside a pair of inmate underwear, recalled Price.

"The guard grabbed the underwear and shook it. A metal detector was not used, and we didn't catch it. We're not 100 percent, but we do the best we can," he said.

The knife was later used to stab an inmate 17 times. The Texas Syndicate is suspected of having ordered the attack.

Officials hope the show of deadly force will be enough to deter such attacks, but they also believe they'll eventually have to prove their point the hard way.

"We'll probably have to shoot somebody to show that we mean business," said West. "The gangs still have some power. We haven't broken them completely. But we'll get to the point when they won't mean anything."