

'If they can close Lexington in nine months, why not today?'

By **SHELLEY MILLER**
and **LOUISE HARTER**

Faced with mounting domestic and international criticism, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons announced Oct. 5 that it will close the control unit for women political prisoners in Lexington, Ky., within 9-11 months. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) issued a scathing report Aug. 26 condemning the unit as "a living tomb" and demanding that it be closed immediately.

While the Lexington control unit will be closed, Bureau of Prisons (BOP) director Michael Quinlan told ACLU officials that a new maximum security women's institution will be built elsewhere to house 150-200 women prisoners whose "security needs" cannot be met by current institutions.

Julio Rosado of the National Campaign to Abolish the Lexington Control Unit, a coalition of activists, lawyers and family members, called the government's action an important concession but added, "If they can close the unit in nine months, they can close it today." Rosado warned of the need for continued pressure to prevent the new prison, whose location is still undisclosed, from becoming a disguised control unit.

The 16-bed control unit, located in the basement of a larger prison in Lexington, opened a year ago this week. The unit currently holds three political prisoners: Puerto Rican independentista Alejandrina Torres, and two long-time supporters of the Black and Puerto Rican liberation struggles, Susan Rosenberg and Silvia Baraldini. At this time, the unit also houses two non-political women.

The Lexington Control Unit is the only such facility for women in the federal system. Marion Federal Prison in Illinois, which houses a much larger control unit for men, was condemned by Amnesty International in September. But unlike Marion, used for allegedly violent or disobedient prisoners (including prison organizers and political activists), the Lexington unit is designed for women whose

alleged outside affiliations pose, in the words of BOP, "a serious threat of external assault for the purpose of aiding the offender's escape." Thus, while some Marion inmates may theoretically "earn" their release into lower-security units, Lexington unit prisoners have been told they will serve their entire sentences (ranging from 35 to 58 years) there. For the political women, the institution has said that only by changing their political affiliations and associations could they be considered for transfer. Rosenberg's attorney Mary O'Melveny says, "The running joke among the guards is that, unlike every other prison in the system, the women there have been given a 'one-way ticket.'"

Among the conditions at the modern, high-tech control unit documented by the ACLU report are total isolation from all other inmates, no visits except from immediate family and attorneys, constant video surveillance, no natural light or air, denial of political literature and censorship of correspondence, daily strip searches, sometimes by male guards, and 1-hour recreation periods in a walled concrete yard.

While families and attorneys say the imprisoned activists maintain high spirits and combativeness, they have also begun to suffer from such symptoms as sleeplessness, seeing spots, memory loss, lethargy and depression. According to Dr. Richard Korn, a correctional psychologist and criminologist who toured Lexington with the ACLU, the unit's goal is "to reduce the prisoners to the state of submission essential for their ideological conversion [or] . . . to reduce them to a state of psychological incompetence. . . . That failing, the only alternative is to destroy them, preferably by making them desperate enough to destroy themselves."

Rosado noted the similarity between the Lexington unit and special political prisons in West Germany and Northern Ireland. Those units are designed to "break" the revolutionaries held there and intimidate outside activists.

Since the unit's opening last year, the National Campaign has coordinated a wide range of investigations and protests. Women's committees and Puerto Rican independence organizations in five cities and Puerto Rico have carried out educational programs, street theater and local pickets. A demonstration in front of Lexington Prison on International Women's Day March 8, drew over 300 people. Thousands of protest letters have been sent to the BOP.

Church, legal and human rights organization involvement, besides the ACLU report,

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has included resolutions and delegations by the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ (of which Torres is a member), the National Lawyers Guild and Amnesty International. Rep. Robert Kastenmeier (D-Wis.) has pressed the BOP for detailed explanations.

On the international front, Amnesty International has sent the BOP a letter of inquiry about Lexington, and in September the International Jurists Conference, composed of 1200 lawyers and judges from throughout the Americas focused on human rights abuses at the facility.

Letters demanding the *immediate* shutdown of the Lexington Control Unit and the transfer of prisoners held there to general population can be sent to: Michael Quinlan, Director, Bureau of Prisons, 320 First St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001. For more information, contact the National Campaign to Abolish the Lexington Control Unit, 294 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11201.

An Evening of Women's Poetry to Shut Down the Lexington Control Unit will be held in New York City Nov. 1, at 7:30 pm at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center, 208 W. 13th St. ■

What You Can Do to Help Close the Lexington Women's Control Unit:

1. Write Michael Quinlan, Director of the BOP, 320 First St, NW, Washington DC 20001, demanding the immediate closure of Lexington and all control units, and the women's transfer to general population.
2. Put the women on your mailing list or write a letter of support: Alejandrina Torres, 92152-024; Susan Rosenberg, 03684-016; Silvia Baraldini, 05125-054, HSU Lexington Box 2000, Lexington KY 40512.
3. Contact Sisters Outside (part of the National Campaign) to get involved: 561-9055, 3543 18th St #17, SF CA 94110.