

URGENT ACTION REQUIRED

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Prisoners across the country are calling for our support and urgent action. First we provide the information we have and then we suggest actions. We hope that you will be able to implement some of these. If you do, please let us know.

Last week a series of rebellions rocked the United States Federal Prison System. Although down played by the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) and the media, which hardly covered the event, there has not been in history a series of rebellions like these, with at least five prisons going up within 48 hours. Although details are still sketchy, media blurbs and letters and calls from prisoners suggest the following.

In February, the highly placed and official U.S. Sentencing Commission, responding to charges of racism, recommended that sentencing for crack cocaine which sends mostly Third World people to prison, and powder cocaine which is used overwhelmingly by white people, result in similar prison terms for possession of similar amounts. Currently 5 gram of crack cocaine, which is about 10 doses and which is worth of \$225, gets a mandatory minimum of 5 years. By comparison, 500 grams of powder cocaine, which is about 5000 doses and worth about \$50,000, gets a mandatory minimum of 5 years. There is thus a 100-to-1 discrepancy in the sentencing. The Commission's recommendations become law unless Congress passes a law over-ruling the recommendations. On October 18 Congress did just that, by passing Senate Bill 1254 (which incorporated House Bill 1254) which explicitly over-rides the Sentencing Commission's recommendation to equalize penalties for crack and powder cocaine. The vote was 332 to 83 against the Sentencing Commission's recommendations. This is the first time since its creation in 1984 that a recommendation of the Commission has been rejected; 500 recommendations had previously been accepted and allowed to pass.

In response to this failure, the first federal prison, in Talladega, Alabama, went up quickly followed by prisons in Illinois, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee. As well as we can determine, after Talladega the rebellions were in support of the first one and then were in refusal to return to cells to be locked down. Again, details are sketchy but at the prison in Memphis Tennessee, over 50 prisoners and guards were treated for smoke inhalation and \$5 million worth of damage was done. We don't yet have information on the damage at the other prisons. In Talladega, 12 prisoners and guards were injured. One of the fire fighters called to the scene told CNN: "It was like a war zone. There were gunshots going off and some explosions going and you had helicopters overhead." In Pennsylvania, the "model" prison in McKean went up when prisoners seized four cell blocks, lit fires, destroyed appliances, and threw furniture out the windows.

Following these rebellions almost every one of the 80 federal prisons was locked down. At some of the prisons, the lockdowns have been partially lifted; at others they persist. Prisoners and guards report that prisoners were encouraged by the calls of unity issued from the Million Man March. In fact, Jesse Jackson denounced mandatory sentencing for crack cocaine at the March. Some also suggest that tensions resulting from the OJ Simpson verdict were also a cause of the lockdown.