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**Posted on Friday, 11 of May , 2007 at 8:03 pm**

**TALLAHASSEE, FLA**—Eight former Florida Department of Corrections employees have been charged with 23 counts stemming from alleged inmate abuse at Hendry Correctional Institution. Charges range from battery and grand theft, to failure to report inmate abuse.

“These former employees were involved in a series of dehumanizing and degrading behaviors,” said Secretary James McDonough. “It appears this criminal behavior was part of a planned conspiracy to violate civil rights and we have informed the FBI and the US Attorney.”

Investigation into the alleged abuse of inmate Charles Gundlah revealed patterns of misconduct among a distinct group of corrections officers. Aggressive pursuit of those indicators by the Department resulted in the uncovering of additional unsavory incidents.

Seven guards are accused of beating prisoners and one faces grand theft charges as the result of a scheme to steal copper wiring and cash it in for recycling fees.

McDonough said that some of the officers sadistically tormented prisoners that they disliked including forcing the inmates to clean toilets with their tongues. Male inmates were given a choice of engaging in homosexual acts or eating food off the prison floors, McDonough said.

After arrest warrants were issued, the eight wanted men turned themselves in. They are Phillip Barger, charged with two counts of battery and two counts failure to report; former sergeant James Brown, one count grand theft, accused to stealing copper wiring; Gabriel Cotilla, one count of battery and one count of failure to report; Kevin Filipowicz, one count battery, one count failure to report; Randy Hazen, two counts battery, two counts failure to report; Ruben Ibarra, one count battery, one count failure to report; William Thiessen, three counts battery, three counts failure to report; and Stephen Whitney, one count battery, one count failure to report.

Bail has been set at \$1,000 each.

The investigation began in mid-March after convicted killer Charles Gundlah reported that he had been choked and beaten by four officers. According to officials, after Gundlah had filed a grievance complaining about his treatment, he was removed from his cell and taken out of sight of security cameras where he was beaten on the head and choked into unconsciousness by the guards.

After Sgt. Bruce Sooy reported the incident when he noticed fresh bruises on Gundlah’s neck, the four officers were fired. Hendry’s warden and assistant warden were relieved of their duties by McDonough and Col. William Avant was fired. According to McDonough, several officers had attended a party at Avant’s home on the prison grounds on March 21 and several had later left the party, driven to the prison parking lot and made threats against Sooy.

McDonough then fired nine more corrections employees at Hendry and other employees were reassigned.

Last month, James Crosby, the former head of the state's corrections system, was sentenced to eight years in prison for taking thousands of dollars in kickbacks from a prison contractor. One of his top aides, Allen Clark, was sentenced to 31 months in prison for his involvement in the kickback scheme. 5-11-07

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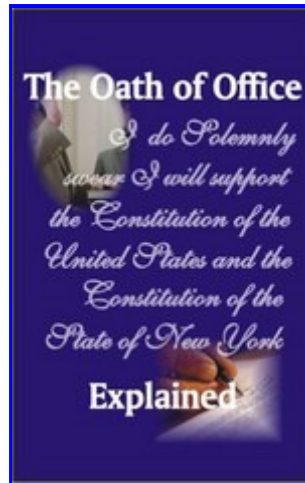


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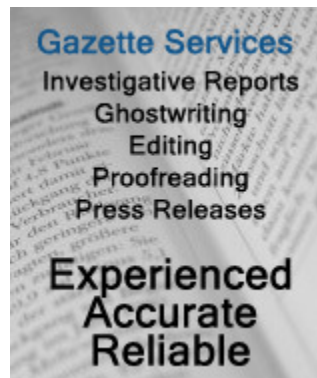
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