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Horrific Mangaung Prison abuse laid bare

Pretoria - From a person who died in the “dark room” of the Mangaung Prison and the death recorded as “suicide”, to three prisoners forcibly injected with anti-psychotic medication. These were some of the disturbing preliminary findings in the long awaited report following a 10-month investigation of the facility. These happened while it was under the control of G4S and Bloemfontein Correctional Contracts in 2013. The Department of Correctional Services made its preliminary findings in June 2014, but kept the report under wraps until now. The Centre for Applied Legal Studies fought a fierce legal battle for the release of the report. This followed claims of torture and the inhumane treatment of inmates at the privately-run prison. In late 2013, the Centre for Applied Legal Studies became aware of reports made public by the Wits Justice Project that people incarcerated at the prison had been tortured by staff. At the time, the Mangaung Correctional Centre was run by British security company G4S as part of a public-private partnership. Following the reports and other serious allegations, Correctional Services took control of the prison and began its investigation into the allegations. The department 10 months later concluded its investigations and handed control of the prison back to G4S. It is one of the largest privately run prisons in the world. The Centre for Applied Legal Studies requested access to the information related to the investigation using the Promotion of Access to Information Act. After six years and following a recent order made by the Gauteng High Court, Pretoria, the centre was finally given access to the report held by the department. It requested the report as part of its work on prison conditions and its interest in the state outsourcing its constitutional obligations to private companies. The report detailed several incidents, including Taser guns bought apparently without any of the officers being trained to use them, to the alleged overdosing of prisoners on their medication. In addition to the report, the Centre for Applied Legal Studies also received the long-awaited response from Bloemfontein Correctional Contracts. The entity had subcontracted the running of the prison to G4S. The response detailed either bare denials that the incidents ever occurred or denials of any wrongdoing. The Centre for Applied Legal Studies said that while it was pleased that it was finally able to review the full report, attorney Sithuthukile Mkhize said the investigations still seemed incomplete. While the report sets out the incidents and invites the companies to give reasons why they should not be held in violation of their duties, they remained mum on any final conclusion. “There is more than enough information here to question why. We are considering pursuing further legal challenges as well as a review of privately run prisons in South Africa,” Mkhize said. The Mangaung Correctional Centre made headlines in 2013 as being a “hell-hole prison” with allegations of inmates being tortured and even killed. Some of the incidents which the department referred to in its report is the incarceration of inmates in the “dark room”. It is said that the cell consists of a cement bed. According to the report it does not have a toilet, lighting, windows or ventilation. While the G4S investigation report records a death as suicide, a pathologist referred to it as a head wound. In its answer to these allegations, Bloemfontein Correctional Contracts said it was not a dark room, but a “quiet room” which had lighting and ventilation. It said an inmate did commit suicide there, but the incident was investigated and later resolved. It said that since 2008 the “quiet room” was no longer used to accommodate inmates, but as a storeroom. In defending the preliminary finding that several inmates were forcibly injected with anti-psychotic drugs, the private prison body simply said it either no longer had the implicated inmates’ files to check, or in other cases, it said this never happened. It was said that one of the inmates suffered from schizophrenia and refused to take his medication, but not even in his case were there records that it was administered by force. Regarding the Taser gun allegations, it admitted that two of these were bought, but one was returned as it was defective. The other was kept in the armoury room as the private prison was not satisfied with its quality. It said it initially bought the two guns to evaluate its use as a non-lethal weapon.