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Prison locked down after weapons found

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ELMIRA | The maximum security Elmira Correctional Facility will be locked down for the third day today as guards continue to comb the grounds for contraband and weapons.

State officials described the painstaking search as a routine precaution. The union representing prison guards, however, said it is a response to three months of escalating violence.

"There's been numerous fights and slashings," said Ed Lattin, a second-shift training relief officer and union steward for the New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association Inc.

"Basically the inmates are fighting each other, but it could escalate into something else," he said. "It was just time to shut it down and assess the problems."

Territorial disputes or gang rivalries may be to blame for many of the 35 incidents involving fights or weapons so far this year, he said. A typical month has about eight incidents, he said.

Prison staff seized 15 to 20 weapons in the first few hours of the lockdown Tuesday, including homemade knives and "ice pick"-type weapons, Lattin said. None were smuggled from outside the prison, he said.

Inmates will remain confined in their cells until the prison is returned to normal status, probably by the end of the week, said James B. Fleteau, spokesman for the Department of Correctional Services.

"There's been a couple minor incidents and things like that in the last several weeks, but those things tend to happen in a maximum security prison," he said. "It's more of a routine search than one for any particular reason."

The last full search of the facility happened in July 2003 after the escape of two convicted killers, Fleteau said. They were later caught and returned to the prison system.

"It's about every two or three years or so that we lock down ... just to do a search and see what we come up with," he said.

Prison staff will examine all areas where inmates are permitted, including common areas and cells. Prisoners caught with contraband are subject to disciplinary hearings.

Grant Marin, western region vice president of the correctional officers union, said the lockdown is evidence of deteriorating conditions.

"Especially at Elmira, it takes a lot for them to lock the place down," he said. "They don't normally lock down unless they have some degree of intelligence that something is going on or a multitude of weapons were found."

Inmates in all prisons routinely fashion weapons out of anything that can be sharpened into a point, he said.

"Mop buckets, pieces of a locker, a bed, the baking cart in the mess hall," Marin said. "They're very inventive. We would like to see the place locked down at least once a year."

The security sweep comes a month after the assault of a female counselor at the hands of a prisoner. Criminal charges remain pending against 35-year-old Alton Hutchinson, who allegedly attacked the woman inside a darkened office.

He was punished with 16.5 years in disciplinary housing after an internal hearing in January found him guilty. The woman, whose identity will not be released, was treated in the Intensive Care Unit at Arnot Ogden Medical Center in Elmira.

Both Lattin and Marin said the lockdown is welcome.

"It calms things down and it cleans out any contraband," Lattin said. "We are able to assess what is going on and ship the troublemakers out."