

B.C. prison guards fear inmate plotting escape with homemade gun

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VANCOUVER — Guards at a B.C. prison are on heightened alert after a “credible threat” that a gang member connected to the Red Scorpions and Bacon brothers is hiding an improvised firearm in the Fraser Regional Correctional Centre.

Correctional staff received an anonymous letter from inmates on Wednesday alleging that the prisoner was planning an escape attempt and had acquired a “pen gun” capable of firing live ammunition, to be used in a hostage-taking scenario.

Correctional officers said they are frustrated that prison officials didn’t order a full lockdown of the Maple Ridge, B.C., institution to address the threat. Instead, they briefly detained only some prisoners and waited two days to bring in sniffer dogs.

The Vancouver Province learned of the allegations through a separate letter from FRCC guards. Details contained in that letter have since been confirmed by a guard and the chair of the correctional officers’ union.

The anonymous letter to prison staff, known in prison lingo as a “kite,” was discovered late Wednesday afternoon. It laid out that contraband such as a cellphone, steroids and other drugs were hidden in cells, and alleged that inmates are being forced to hide contraband through threats of violence.

Management responded by locking up the prisoner’s unit and conducting a search.

“Whatever [the anonymous inmates] told us — drugs, steroids — it was in the exact place in the cell, TV, wherever [the kite] said they were trying to hide it,” said one guard, who spoke to the Vancouver Province on condition of anonymity. “Everything written in there happened, in the exact cell.”

No gun was found.

However, only one unit was frisked and half the prison was unaffected by the search, the guard said.

The prisoner was moved into segregation following the search.

Dean Purdy, chair of the Correctional and Sheriff Services Component of the B.C. Government Employees Union, on Sunday confirmed that correctional officers at Fraser Region are on the lookout for an improvised firearm. They are also worried that prison officials’ refusal to initiate a full lockdown is a danger to guards and the public.

“We can confirm there was a credible threat,” Purdy said. “We would have liked to see the jail go to immediate lockdown. We’re dealing with more and more gang members inside our max security jails, and Fraser Regional is no different.”

Purdy said the officers he has spoken to still believe the inmates responsible may have had time to hide a gun.

“Most people think there’s a good chance this gun is here,” the guard agreed.

“Stuff gets around the jail. A lot of times we don’t know how,” he said. “There’s no control factor. They could have been hiding it or hooping it [hiding it in the anal cavity], or it could have been passed off or slipped under a common room door to another unit, and then it’s gone.”

Pen guns, also known as zip guns, are typically small metal casings modified to fire .22-calibre bullets. B.C. Corrections denied Sunday the allegation that its response to the threat put employees and inmates at risk.

A spokesperson said staff and management at FRCC have taken all appropriate measures to address any issues of concern that may have been brought to their attention, adding that the union co-chair has thanked management for doing so.

The spokesperson confirmed a unit was locked down following the threat, while cells, common areas and personal effects were searched. The warden and management responded according to established procedure, the spokesperson added, saying B.C. Corrections would not deny a lockdown when credible information is received about a weapon.

The jail, built in 1990 for 254 inmates, now routinely houses 500. One staff member is often left responsible for 40 inmates, Purdy said.

“There’s an increase in frustration amongst our members who work at Fraser Regional and other B.C. jails,” Purdy said.

That frustration is evident in the letter sent to the Vancouver Province.

“The threat of escape is not new to corrections, however, the manner in which BC Corrections . . . handles these threats are (sic) frightening,” the letter reads. “The indifference of management to their front line staff and the complete disregard for their safety is disgusting.”

The provincial government last year announced a new prison will be built in the Okanagan, but the completion date is still four years away. In the meantime, prison violence and assaults on correctional officers are on the rise, Purdy said.

Requests for better working conditions have fallen on deaf ears, Purdy said. The union is now working with Worksafe BC in a bid to improve working conditions, he added