

Rally focuses on political prisoners' release

■ Penitentiary activists kick off Human Rights Day by discussing treatment of prisoners and injustices in the U.S. prison system.

By KIM SWEET
Staff writer

As the sun set on the Nebraska State Penitentiary on Friday night, Bobby Castillo reflected on his experiences with similar walls.

Castillo, who spent 14 years inside a California prison, made an attempt to motivate a crowd that gathered at a rally to fight for the release of political prisoners from Nebraska and around the world.

"They build a prison to restrict movement, to restrict communication, to restrict humanity," said Castillo, who works on the Leonard Peltier Defense Fund.

Castillo used the rally to emphasize the inhumane treatment he said occurs in prisons around the United States. Instead of trying to rehabilitate prisoners, correctional institutions around the nation are simply hurting prisoners.

"They punish, they punish, and they punish," Castillo said.

The rally was also used to bring awareness to the issues of political prisoners and the overwhelming

number of minorities who go through the prison system.

"Most of our prisons are filled up with color," said Tekla Johnson, organizer of the event. "Over 40 percent in some places."

Susan Miller, professor of Native American History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said one-third of American Indian males and one-fifth of American Indian females have become part of the prison population in the United States.

Having so many men and women imprisoned destroys the American Indian culture, she said.

With fewer and fewer males on reservations, American Indian women are forced to look outside the reservations for potential husbands, she said. This causes resources to leave the reservations.

"Because that kind of situation is having such an impact on the well-being of the native community, many of us look at all Native American prisoners as political prisoners," she said.

The rally, which served as a kick-off to Human Rights Day, was held to show support for David Rice, Leonard Peltier and others whom some see as being arrested for politically motivated reasons.

Rice is in the state penitentiary for the death of an Omaha police officer, who was killed by a bomb planted in a vacant house in 1970. The activists believe the FBI set him up to be convicted.

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TEKLA JOHNSON
event organizer

Peltier was arrested on charges of murdering two FBI agents and another American Indian Movement leader in 1975 on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation.

Activists have demanded his release because they say his conviction was based on fabricated evidence and coerced testimony.

UNL senior Lisa Sock, president of Amnesty International, said the rally and Human Rights Day coincided with Amnesty International's efforts to reveal human rights violations that are occurring in U.S. prisons.

Sock, a political science major, said the United States needs to look at the human rights violations in its own country before criticizing others.

"How can we as a country condemn any state if we have human rights violations here in the United States?"

Human rights violations rampant, speaker says

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of the Black Panther Party, and he spoke of working to stop Randolph K. Reeves' scheduled execution.

Reeves is on Nebraska's death row, scheduled to be executed Jan. 14 for the 1982 murder of two women at a Quaker meeting in Lincoln.

Incidents such as these imprisonments, Hinds said, are typical in the United States, where "flagrant, consistent violations of human rights" are too common.

"The United States has consistently refused to investigate the validity of serious, blatant human rights violations within its own borders in spite of voluminous documents and petitions that have been filed with the appropriate governmental agencies and departments," he said.

U.S. history, he said, is peppered with such violations, beginning in colonial times with slavery.

Even with the end of slavery, he said, negative effects have never completely subsided.

Today, dealing with human rights violations is difficult for minorities, because any enforcement rests on access to lawyers, money and the capacity to prove that racism was intended, Hinds said.

Those unfair circumstances, he said, are apparent in San Francisco, where blacks make up 18 percent of the population but constitute 50 percent of the homeless.

Laws, he said, are intended to protect those who make them, not those who rebel against them. More than the law, it is race that determines who is punished and who is not, he said.

"Race is perhaps the most significant determining factor in the United States' social structure,"

Hinds said.

A consistent reminder throughout Hinds' speech was international human rights documents the United States has signed.

It has taken the United States more than 20 years to sign some of these documents, he said, and the reason is because of its practices.

"The fear of the United States in signing any of these international covenants was because of the dirty linen we have right in within the bowels of the U.S.," Hinds said.

What activists need to do now, he said, is make sure legislators are kept aware of human rights violations in the United States.

Then, he said, when the United Nations checks up on U.S. progress in enforcing human rights, eventually something will have to be reported.

"I believe we are in a new period," Hinds said. "I'm excited because there are unique possibilities for us."

"We who are human rights activists must understand the possibilities. Examine them. Take advantage of them."

Anita Fussell, a member of the ethnic harmony team at First Plymouth Church, said she came to the conference to become more educated about other races.

"Part of understanding our own racism is getting to know other people," she said.

In addition to Hinds' speech, the conference included workshops on racism, women's and children's rights and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues.

Fussell said it was heartening to see the mixture of races and backgrounds that the conference brought together.

"Being introduced to all the people who've lived these things was quite interesting."

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Online construction project first of its kind

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lem, and the architectural engineer from Chicago can view that video online.

This prevents the engineer from having to travel back to Lincoln. Changes to blueprints can be made online.

The program allows all work needed in a construction project to be done online.

The Web-based project is a step that hasn't been taken in the construction industry, Khattab said.

It takes time to adapt to new technology, he said, and the university has to help the industry with this.

"We have to lead the industry to a new level," he said.

When the idea to create such a program arose, Khattab decided he and Wilhelmi had to create a prototype and then present it to national contractors to get support for it.

That way, Khattab said, the contractors could see, not just hear about, how helpful the program could be for them.

Wilhelmi said the usefulness of the program lies in its efficiency.

"It's easier to get resources, easier to share resources," he said.

Khattab hopes that eventually many businesses, such as medicine or manufacturing, will be able to modify the program's basic idea for its specific needs.

The basic requirements for companies wanting to install and use such a program are PCs with Windows 95 or 98, an Internet connection, MS

NetMeeting and MS Internet Explorer software.

Khattab said architectural, construction and engineering firms have been encouraged to make Internet-based project management a part of their business. He hopes his program will fill that need.

A handful of businesses across the country now offer products similar to the program, so Khattab and Wilhelmi are seeking to make theirs as comprehensive as possible.

The program should be ready for marketing by the summer of 1999. Testing of the program in some Lincoln and Omaha businesses will begin in January.

Construction management students will be helping Khattab test the program.

Khattab has designed a new course based on his system called "Computer-aided Project Management," which will be available in the coming spring semester.

Students in the class will help with the testing phase of the program, including going to companies to get actual projects.

They will then simulate those projects on the prototype Web site and determine what else needs to be done to the software, Khattab said.

Khattab said creating this project with the help of Wilhelmi has helped him as a teacher.

Wilhelmi said students will benefit from working with Khattab on the new program.

"It shows how new technology will be utilized."