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Inmate Abuse Caught on Camera at St. Croix Prison Reignites Scrutiny Over Consent Decree

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The John A. Bell Correctional Facility (formerly the Golden Grove Correctional Facility) on St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

A disturbing video that captured a violent attack among inmates at the John A. Bell Correctional facility on St. Croix left a mother scrambling to remove her son from what appears to be a lawless environment at the prison.

The Bureau of Corrections said Monday it acted swiftly to get the situation under control once it was made aware of the incident, which occurred last week. "The Virgin Islands Bureau of Corrections is aware of the situation which happened last week," said B.O.C. Public Information Officer Kyza Callwood, who assured that the agency "has taken concrete steps per policy to

address the matter."

Governor Albert Bryan Jr. told the Consortium that the incident was of "grave concern" to him, and that he was working with the V.I. Attorney General and B.O.C. Director Winnie Testamark to immediately correct the problem.

Consortium journalists were made aware of two videos, both of which appear to show inmates on the receiving end of physical abuse. In one video, an inmate is seen being slapped in the face while in the longer piece of footage, another inmate is shown with his head being shoved in the toilet of the cell. At least one of the perpetrators is a suspect in a high profile homicide incident recently extradited from the mainland to face charges on St. Croix, according to police.

While Mr. Callwood did not disclose the identity of the attackers, he did indicate that prison officials had completed an administrative investigation into the attack. Cell searches were also conducted as part of the response, and multiple mobile phones – contraband behind prison walls – were confiscated. No inmates were found to have sustained any medically related injuries as a result of the incident, he said.

Mr. Callwood said that the alleged perpetrators were placed in administrative confinement pending a disciplinary hearing. "All acts of assault are taken seriously," said the acting PIO. "Each situation of a similar or close magnitude is immediately addressed through the appropriate procedure." He did not say whether that procedure included reporting such assaults to the V.I. Police Department. VIPD Criminal Investigation Bureau Commander Naomi Joseph said B.O.C. did not report the matter to the VIPD, with the department learning of the situation after the videos had gone viral on social media. Commander Joseph added that the bureau said it would handle the matter internally because the crimes were classified as simple assault.

The latest B.O.C. fallout comes against the backdrop of an almost four decade-old [consent decree](#), following consistent and serious allegations of an environment at the correctional facility that enables constitutional violations. In 2020, Bureau Director Winnie Testamark said that it would have taken the agency another 25 years to bring the prison system into compliance. Ms. Testamark told lawmakers during a hearing of the 34th Legislature's Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety that although a corrections officer had been caught on video assaulting an inmate, nothing could be done because too much time had elapsed.

Last June, court-appointed independent monitor Kenneth Ray noted during the 24th monitor's report that the bureau was falling behind on progress towards achieving the objectives of the consent decree, with major issues such as pre-trial detainees being housed together with convicted and sentenced inmates, along with inmates of varying security classifications being housed in the same cells. The result, according to Mr. Ray, was an "unprecedented" increase in violence among inmates of the facility.

Although Mr. Callwood did not address the ramifications of this most recent incident on the Bureau's standing with the federal government regarding the existing consent decree, he thanked the quick response of the correctional officers and supervisors at the John A. Bell Correctional facility, which he said "ensured that the security operations of the facility remained unaffected."