

STATE

Security lapses blamed for Gurule's fatal death row escape

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HUNTSVILLE, Texas — A Texas death row inmate escaped because of security lapses and now the other inmates who had special privileges as part of a work program are being punished unfairly, several condemned prisoners say.

"They're feeding ... you all a painted picture, more than just 'spin' to make us all take the blame," one inmate, who requested anonymity, told *The Associated Press*. "Security measures only work if they're implemented.

"The opportunity had been created and it was just a matter of time before someone took the bait. It's been months since they had officers watching the recreation yard."

Convicted killer Martin Gurule and six other inmates used a piece of hacksaw blade to cut through a fence around the

recreation yard Thanksgiving night. Then they climbed to the roof of the Ellis Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice before making it to a pair of perimeter fences.

Gurule, 29, scaled the 10-foot-high fences topped with coils of stainless steel razor wire, evading gunfire from guards stationed in towers 200 feet away. The six others surrendered.

Gurule's body was found last Thursday, almost seven full days after the escape, in a creek less than a mile away. Preliminary autopsy findings determined he drowned not long after the escape.

Gurule, who once worked in the garment factory, was more recently a porter or janitor who was allowed access to other inmates. Normally, inmates considered less of a risk are allowed some freedom of movement in and out of their cells in exchange for work.

After the escape, the first from

Texas death row since 1934, authorities suspended the garment factory work program and confined all inmates to their cells.

"The work program was a good thing for a lot of people," one inmate wrote. "We shouldn't be punished for something we didn't do."

"These things weren't the problems that led to this, it was security," said another. "The administration is blowing smoke. They are (upset) here, trying to do their best at damage control both for the prison system and their own personal careers."

In their remarks, inmates were adamant about not being identified, saying they feared for their own safety.

Texas Board of Criminal Justice Chairman Allan Polunsky has named a panel to investigate the escape and report to the full board in January.

"We're not denying we have a problem in certain areas of the security system," said Mac

Stringfellow, the board's representative on the investigating panel. "Obviously we do if seven inmates can get out of death row and make to the perimeter fences. We know that."

He said the panel, which began its work Monday, would be looking primarily at the design of the prison and materials used for security; whether policies and procedures were adequate; whether policies were followed or needed to be changed; and at the personnel.

Stringfellow noted prison officials and employees responded quickly and efficiently to the escape, followed the system's emergency action plan and managed to contain Gurule.

"On a positive note, the entire system did not crater," he said.

Since the escape, reporters' normal weekly interview access to inmates has been suspended because of the prison lockdown. But in letters sent to the AP, inmates said that in addition to

the immediate lockdown and suspension of the work program, authorities at the Ellis Unit have conducted intense searches of their cells, known as shake-downs.

"Our cells have been completely trashed," said one inmate, who complained that officers destroyed personal property.

"We fully expect it isn't over yet," another wrote.

They also noted that despite a similar escape attempt a year and a half ago, no security improvements were made. In that incident, two inmates cut through a recreation yard fence with a hacksaw blade but were stopped when a tower guard discovered one of them climbing the first of two perimeter fences.

"They didn't put more chain-link

up, or razor wire," an inmate wrote. "No changes at all. All these are things that security should have changed, or modified, after the first attempt. They didn't and now they have an

almost identical crisis, except this time it is worse ... because one got away."

Prisoners said the guard presence in recreation yards has lessened over the years to the point where only one officer "floats" around all the yards, which adjoin wings of the prison's death row sections.

"It works, so long as the officer does patrol," an inmate remarked. "Most of the time the officers sit on their butts beside the garment factory... You may not see an officer on yard patrol for an hour at a time.

"There are exceptions, make no mistake about it. There are some officers who patrol it every few minutes, but the majority don't."