

## Edmonton Max Reflections

*Luqman Osman*

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I am going to write about my thoughts and negative experiences in Edmonton Institution. One of the biggest disadvantages facing prisoners here is the lack of civil lawyers. There are only two lawyers in Edmonton that handle lawsuits and fight for prisoners. It is almost impossible to reach them as they do not have a cell number to contact and they are always booked up according to their secretaries. It makes correctional officers in Edmonton more emboldened to carry out abuse on prisoners because they are not getting sued. Many prisoners are assaulted and have their rights violated, but the two-year window in which a lawsuit can be brought up runs out while they are still searching for a lawyer to take their case or they end up simply not suing all together. Last December on C-Unit, we decided to peacefully protest because we were not getting our one hour of fresh air or gym time and our hot plate had not been fixed or replaced for three months. Additionally, we were suffering general abuse from officers who were routinely tossing our cells and damaging our property.

We stayed out the first day and demanded access to the negotiator in order to get the warden to fix these problems. They deployed the Emergency Response Team (ERT), gassed our unit, intentionally aimed and shot my leg on camera, and assaulted a couple of prisoners. The next day, we covered our windows in our cells to fix the same problems and asked to speak with the warden. The warden refused to speak with us and the ERT was deployed again. They pepper sprayed us in our cells, using canister flashed bangs to disorient us and force us back into our cells. They moved into each cell in order to assault and extract us. They put us in the shower to decontaminate, but did not give us clean clothes to change into and subsequently put us right back into our contaminated cells at night until the afternoon of the following day. We were denied supper and breakfast that night and morning, and we were forced to remain inside our contaminated cells, inhaling the residual chemicals left behind.

We wrote grievances about these use of force incidents, but management altered and downgraded our grievances in order to prevent it from reaching Ottawa. We contacted the inmate redress office and resubmitted our grievances. We had managers asking us to withdraw our grievances and threatening to ship us all across Canada if we refused to deal with our problems in house. We were told that things would get a lot worse for us,

especially myself as the unit representative, if we did not listen to them. I refused to withdraw my grievances.

On 31 March 2020 I was moved from C-Unit to the Structured Intervention Unit, formerly known as segregation. The story management fabricated against me is that allegedly on March 27, somebody assaulted a staff member and I was one of the key figures who organized it. I had absolutely nothing to do with the alleged incident and management is trying to use this allegation to involuntarily transfer me out of this penitentiary. I was also involved in a hunger strike and gave an interview to the media about the inhumane conditions in this prison. They tried to transfer me to Saskatchewan and Stony Mountain, but Saskatchewan said I have an incompatible there and Stony Mountain did not accept me. They are currently pushing to send me to Kent Institution in British Columbia.

I wrote a rebuttal stating that I have family support in Edmonton, Alberta and Toronto, Ontario. I wrote that British Columbia is too far away from my family support system and would make it impossible for them to visit me. I requested to either stay in Edmonton Institution or go to Collins Bay if I must be transferred. I stated that I am also willing to go to Donnacona in Quebec as it would still be possible for my family in Ontario to drive there. The warden did not send my file to Collins Bay or Donnacona, stating that they are only doing inter-regional transfers due to COVID-19. The warden denied my rebuttal saying that I could maintain family bonds through phone calls, video visits and writing correspondence. The warden's response essentially ignored my explanation that not being able to see my family will impact me negatively, both physically and emotionally.

I have experienced racism and discrimination from staff towards myself and other Black prisoners – they make no effort to hide their racism and racist remarks. We are falsely labelled as gang members and our normal Black people handshakes are mischaracterized in our reports as being gang handshakes. There are no hygiene items, such as skin or haircare products, for Black people on the canteen. We are ignored whenever we ask for these essential hygiene products and our request forms go unanswered. In a three month period over the winter, staff took six Black prisoners from the unit I was in (including myself) and we are all placed on the involuntary transfer list to different provinces. I had not experienced racism so fully until coming to Edmonton Institution. The way staff talk demeans, disrespects and dehumanizes Black prisoners. Their speech is disgusting. They go as

far as to transfer Black prisoners out of the penitentiary as soon as there are more than six prisoners who are Black on one unit. Whenever Black prisoners speak up about a racist or abusive officer to management, the officers double down on their abuse, instead of addressing their behaviour.

Another thing that affects all prisoners in Edmonton Institution is that there are no perishable items on the canteen list. The warden's excuse is that the institution does not have a freezer to put those items in. As a result, prisoners can only buy junk food because there are no healthy foods, with the exception of maybe protein powder and tuna. There is also no programming or school offered on the two general population units, which makes it almost impossible for prisoners to work toward moving into medium-security or getting parole.

The Edmonton Institution is broken and blatantly corrupt. I hope people who care about human rights are able to fix this institution. This penitentiary is full of abuse and neglect, causing prisoners to develop mental health problems. The Edmonton Institution does not rehabilitate people, but rather creates monsters and then releases them into society without any concern for public safety. I hope that through sharing my experiences and perspectives I was able to offer some insight into life at Edmonton Institution. God bless you all!

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Luqman Osman* is currently held in Edmonton Institution. He can be reached by mail at:

Luqman Osman  
21611 Meridian Street  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T5Y 6E7