

Interview with Hugo Pinell

Hugo Pinell and Kiilu Nyasha

The following is an edited transcript of an interview for Prison Focus radio show, KPOO, 89.5 FM, on June 15, 2006 with political prisoner, Hugo Antonio Lyons Pinell (aka Yogi Bear)

Luis Bato Talamantez: We have comrade Nedzada [Handukic] and Kiilu Nyasha and we have Gordon Kaupp, an attorney here in San Francisco who is representing the subject of our show, Hugo Antonio Pinell. And on-line shortly, we will have Kiilu, all of whom traveled to Pelican Bay State Prison, which is, I think, 10 miles away from the Oregon state border, a very remote prison, super-maximum prison, to visit Hugo. We claim that he is probably the longest held Nicaraguan citizen in the world, 42 years. And in the past he was also a co-defendant with myself [sic] during the 1970s in the so-called San Quentin Six case. We want to ask Gordon here, for somebody here in America who has been in prison for 42 years, I mean, how do you square that with justice? Can you tell us more about his case, Gordon?

Gordon Kaupp: I have the honor of representing Mr. Pinell, and I had the honor of meeting him several weeks ago up at Pelican Bay State Prison which is an extremely cold, dark, foreboding institution in which many lives are thrown away. There are legal reasons and social-political reasons why Yogi is up there. In the board hearing, we're dealing with the legal reasons which serve as the mechanism for the social and political reasons that keep him locked up; namely, the way that they keep somebody held for such a long and inhumane period of time is by focusing on the suitability factors in his parole board hearing. And the suitability factors are mostly factors that remain unchanging, things that he can do nothing about since the convictions that he has suffered. So the Board will say, well, we look at the underlying crime and if it's so callous, if it shows a callous disregard for suffering, we're going to deny him his hearing. If he's got a prior criminal history, we're going to deny him his release. If he has an unstable social history, we're going to deny him his release. And so, you look at these parole board decisions that the commissioners issue, year after year or every couple years, however long it is between your time visiting the Board, they deny prisoners, old lifers, for the same reasons every single time. And these are unchanging factors. So, essentially they convert a sentence of nine to

life to a sentence of life without parole. It's a really big problem here in California.

Bato: Hugo Pinell will be going to the board very, very shortly, as he has been going to the board for the last 42 years that he has been in prison. We're saying 42 continuous years there's been no parole, there's been no furloughs, it's all been very, very hard time that Hugo, my comrade, has had to do all these years in the worst conditions because before they built Pelican Bay, he was in the second worst, which was Corcoran State Prison, and before they built that supermax, they took him back to Tehachapi, which is out in the desert. These are horrible places for a human organism to have to try to exist in. We also understand that because of his political history inside prison that he is a legacy who will always be remembered in connection with comrade George Jackson and that whole period of prison rebellion and prison reform that has stretched from thirty years. I remember not too far back they even took him to the board and slammed him with five years and since then the times for him to return to the board have lessened, but, nonetheless, he's been continuously denied. Suppose he is denied, where do you go with a denial from the Board of Prison Terms?

Gordon: That's a really tough question when there is no justice in the justice system—where to go? Fortunately the courts have been a little bit better than the parole boards. The parole board is pretty much a guaranteed denial. Surprisingly, Arnold Schwarzenegger is a little better with releasing prisoners than Grey Davis was. But still, what you do is, you go to the parole hearings and you make the best arguments you can, and essentially, you pull the rug out from under the commissioner so that any excuses they have to deny him parole, you destroy those, you whittle away those excuses so that after the board denies him parole, you bring it to the courts. The courts have continuously reigned in the Board of Prison Terms and told them, look, you gotta follow the Constitution and what you have to do is base your decision on some evidence. And if you continue to deny life inmates parole based on unchanging factors, that begins to weigh upon the inmates' liberty interests. So what we really have to do is set up a really good record at his parole board hearing and then take it to the courts and show the courts that they are denying him parole without any evidence that he would pose an unreasonable risk of danger to society, which is the legal standard they operate under.

Bato: Well, I'm glad that you mentioned the so-called liberty interest because for a number of years at the California Prison Focus and prior to that at the Pelican Bay Information Project, a span of 15 years, the work that we did around prisoners and prison issues was that the State just did not acknowledge that there was a liberty interest. I mean, why are you being held? Any democratic society requires that, through habeas corpus, [you] be able to explain why are you holding me. With Hugo, there's never been that explanation other than the fact that what we know about prison internal politics is that the Department of Corrections considers him a trophy, so to speak. The Guard's Union, they say he's the worst of the worst and this and that; they hold these guys as some kind of emblem. But the thing about Hugo is that he has always been able to maintain his humanity. Hugo and I, we're in touch kind of spiritually, you know. He knows that I wish him all the love possible in the world and that when I left the Adjustment Center, August 20, 1976, the day they told me I would be set free, after the San Quentin Six trial, they popped my cell door in the Adjustment Center; they gave me a minute to run down the tier and say good-bye to everybody. I saw Hugo in his cell and you know what, he had the sweetest look on his face. He was so happy for me. And I said "Hugo, Hugo, I'll never forget you." All he said was to say to his mother that he loved her. So there is that very human quality about Hugo a lot of people don't understand because he grew up between here and the Fillmore and the Mission and he vanished off the streets of San Francisco in 1965. The State gobbled him up and we have factored in that the State of California has made about one million dollars in upkeep and rent holding him captive all these years; and it makes no sense today. He has been in the Security Housing Unit [SHU] absolutely too long. It's a miracle he's still in the great condition he's in.

I want to also ask Nedzada, who also visited Hugo, when you first saw him there in the SHU where the visits take place in this kinda dungeon keep, through Plexiglas, through a phone, what was your first impression?

Nedzada: Well, I don't know. We just felt like it was a bond there, like I already knew him for so long. I had been writing letters to him, you know, I started through Kiilu, and it was just the expression, his look in his eyes and everything; he just looked like he was gonna hug me, you know, I was like, oh my god, I couldn't believe it! I couldn't believe the shape that he was in and he looked really, really good, and you could tell that this man

was so positive and had such great, wonderful energies about him and it was beautiful to be there. At the same time it was very sad to see him locked up in there because I feel like he would be a wonderful contribution to our society to be out here instead of locked up in there, and he sets such a good example, and his principles are like, whew man, outta this world, like, he won't compromise for anything, and you know that.

Bato: Yeah, and, Gordon, I know this was the first time you had a chance to meet Hugo face to face even though it was in the conditions you guys were in, but what was your first impression?

Gordon: You know, I didn't know what to expect when I arrived at Pelican Bay. And when I met him, I met somebody who deeply moved me. He is an inspiration; he is someone who has taken everything that they have tried to do to him to break his spirit and he has reversed it on them. He says, the one thing I learned from W. L. Nolen is that they cannot take control of how you live your life. And so when they try to make me angry, I turn that into love. And he is such a warm person. He is such a loving person. Everything he does is from his heart, and it's about his love for humanity, his love for nature, his love for all life. And he blew me away. When I went the second day, even though we only had a couple hours the day before, when I walked in, he came right up to the glass, he put both his hands up. And he had a wide grin across his face and he is just something else. He's really the kind of person like Nedzada said that would contribute so much to this world.

Bato: Yeah, I do remember that he had a very infectious smile. So my heart always goes out to Hugo and I'm so elated that you, Gordon, and comrade Nedzada and Kiilu Nyasha, who will be coming on the line real soon, have gone up there because I think that you really have put some energy into this dungeon-keep where everything is designed to shut the sun out, and Hugo hasn't seen the moon in 30, 40 years. We need to understand that this is a story of tragedy. It's a relatively unknown story, but America is not good about justice for everybody. You know, it really is not because that's what we're talking about right now, 42 years! It's just unimaginable. I have been free 30 years, you know, but he never did get free after our trial. Three of us were released after the San Quentin trial and three of us were convicted. So you tell us, Gordon, what's possible for helping Hugo out?

Gordon: Well, I will talk a little bit about Hugo Pinell, but I will also say that I think we need to bring a larger campaign to bear for all political prisoners in the United States. And I was so inspired by Hugo Pinell, but also so disappointed that so many people will talk about political prisoners, but very rarely do people bring real concrete support. So, what I would like to do is to campaign people to get money together, to get resources together, to get a clinical program running for all political prisoners in the United States; so we have a concerted effort to work on their cases. Because before I stepped in on Yogi's case, he was going to do this on his own. He did not have an attorney. And a lot of these guys who have been in, and who are in here for every single one of us, have been left behind in a significant way. The same was true for Ruchell Magee whom I represented earlier, last year. But I'd also like to go back to something, and that is that Yogi Pinell has been in the security housing unit for 33 years, solitary confinement, and every year, once or twice a year, there is a confidential memo that is put into his file that he does not see, that his attorney does not see, that there is no way to challenge, that says that he is in a gang and that he has been in a gang, and that's why he's in the security housing unit. So, there's this backdoor way that the prison has used to keep him in the SHU and they keep saying he's in a gang. But, if you're in the SHU how can you maintain a gang affiliation for 33 years? It's impossible for that to be the case and it's also impossible to challenge, because, like I said, it's a confidential memo that his attorney can't see, that he can't see. So, we're going to challenge this at his hearing. We're going to challenge this in the courts, but what I'm also going to do is to start getting a larger campaign together to put pressure on, legal pressure on for all political prisoners. And we're going to go to the people with money, and we're going to attorneys across this country to help free the political prisoners who are serving time for every single one of us.

Bato: Thank you, Gordon. We're going to come back to Gordon in a little bit. We have Kiilu Nyasha on the line and we're going to patch her in and she was also there to see Hugo. Hugo is a very powerful person, you know, a completely new revolutionary person, you know, in who he is and what he stands for. Like Nedzada says, he will not budge on certain issues, he will never surrender, because the Department of Corrections sees him as their trophy and they would like to really break his spirit, and the spirit of all revolutionaries who have fought inside prison, comrade George Jackson

and all the other revolutionaries who have fought the system from in prison and are fighting the system today in prison. You know, our prison radio show is basically about keeping the spirit of resistance alive. Kiilu, more than anybody, the last 30, 40 years, you have been a great source to a great many people including myself, the San Quentin Six, and across the country the old line Panthers whom you knew, Romaine Fitzgerald, the longest held Panther here in California. You have been an inspiration for all of us. And to see Hugo Pinell, you know, he just loves you so much. Tell us, how's he doing these days, Kiilu?

Kiilu: Well, again, I have to be repetitious here. He's amazing! He's just absolutely amazing! This was the fifth visit that I've had up there, but the last visit was close to five years ago. And it just amazed me that he looked better than he looked five years ago. I mean he's just unbelievable—in his discipline, in his high energy, and he's a vegetarian, as you may know. By the way, the Chaplain rescinded his vegetarian diet that you guys fought so hard for him to get, California Prison Focus, I mean, because it wasn't on religious grounds. He sticks to his vegetarian diet, but I worry about him getting his nutrition and his protein. But in any case, he still looks fantastic. And he works out and his high energy is unbelievable and of course his loving spirit. And I want to just give some quick quotes from some letters I have been perusing.

I don't ever regret speaking out and standing up for our people in here. I regret not being able to give more.

That's out of one letter. And here's a kind of political statement:

I used to believe that for our freedom to be real and effective, we first needed land. But with time, I've come to realize that just like our struggle is for humanity, freedom lies in the people, new people, first and foremost, for the people will make it all happen and wherever we are, that will be our freedom home, our freedom land. Once I was sure of that, I began to grow closer to my true loved ones, for in their true love and hearts, I have found my personal freedom, justice, peace and security, my personal home. That's how I've managed to keep pushing and growing, living in the hearts of beautiful and special people.

In another letter he says, along the same vein, by the way.

I hope you've understood what I've tried to say. The way things are for us in the world, we don't have a land we can really call our own, since we don't govern it. Therefore, the surest, safest and best station of living is in our hearts. That's my home. For I know I'm really loved and wanted there and you all already live in my heart. You take care, big hugs, kisses and real love, Yogi Bear.

Bato: Hugo has just really, really been a great correspondence writer, you know. Over the years he's written really, really outstanding humanitarian letters, you know, that everybody should take to heart.

Kiilu: And that's how he survives 24/7 lockup, you know except for the, the "dog run", that outdoor closet they allow him to get out in. But people need to realize that is a windowless cell that he has been in 16 years of his 30 odd years of solitary confinement. Pelican Bay SHU is what they call a supermax prison that is right now being cited by the UN Commission at the recent international court hearings as a violation of human rights. Pelican Bay itself is a violation.

Bato: Pelican Bay early on, as the work we did with the Pelican Bay Information Project, was cited by the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations in their journal 1994/95 as one of the worst three prisons in America. So, we believe that during the early formative years of running Pelican Bay, which was '91, '92, '93, prior to the Madrid [Madrid v. Gomez] "cruel and unusual punishment" federal case here in San Francisco, some of the worst atrocities had occurred during those years in America, just by the personnel who were coming home from the first Gulf War taking jobs within the prison system. So, it's been a very, very brutal regime there at Pelican Bay and elsewhere at California prisons because, you know, the training that some of the personnel get, and today we're seeing a lot of these same Service people being the custodians and keepers of a great amount [sic] of people that are going through prisons today. So, the spirit of Hugo Pinell is just so important to keep alive. I think that there will be a major campaign to free Hugo.

Kiilu: There really should be because, Bato, collectively speaking we Americans are losing our humanity. I mean, it's a sad and frightening thing, because we are tolerating Guantanamo, three suicides, and we're tolerating this incredible, callous statement that came out of the State Department about that. And then, we're tolerating Iraq and the on-going slaughter there. We tolerated Haiti and the slaughter there. We're tolerating so much inhumanity. And as you know there are well over two million people in prison, and rising at the rate of a thousand prisoners a week.

Bato: What about that, Gordon?

Gordon: I mean, it's absolutely true, you know. We're incarcerating large numbers of our own population at levels that have never been seen in humanity. I was watching this documentary yesterday and this law enforcement against prohibition was putting up figures about incarceration rates of Black males under South African apartheid. It was something like 849 black males per 100,000 under apartheid were incarcerated; in the United States, Black males per 100,000 is something like 4,991. So we are way, astronomically beyond even what South Africa during apartheid was doing to Black men. Not to mention the rise in women prisoners, not to mention the rise in Latino prisoners, not to mention that Native Americans proportionately have more people incarcerated than any other group of people in this country. And I think Kiilu was right on. We have a sub-human conscience in this country that has been corroded, corrupted, and we need to regain our humanity. One thing that Yogi said when I was up there, and this is the quote I wanted to read and I'll insert it here. He said, "If you want to change the world, change yourself. We have a society of half-people, to have a whole society, we need whole people." And that's what he's about is transforming himself. And that's really why he is still locked up in Pelican Bay. Because it's not about rehabilitation, it's about domination. And the prison system wants to break your will, they want to dominate you and they want you to submit. And it's like a man-over-a-dog kind of environment, and they want you to submit, and they want to rub your nose in it. And then maybe, maybe they'll let you out. And because he's not gonna submit, because he's proud, because he has dignity, and integrity...

Kiilu: ...and he will maintain it at all costs

Gordon: Yes.

Kiilu: Yes. And that's why I love and respect him so much. I don't know too many other people in the world who have the kind of integrity and uncompromising principles and great love that Yogi has. And he would be an incredible role model. Also, I want to throw in another thing. Yogi is so principled that when he first went on the yard at San Quentin—you know how segregated it is, it's divided into basically Mexican, Whites and Blacks. And years ago, back in the 1960s, it was very segregated and you didn't cross those lines. So, Hugo identifies as a Black Nicaraguan, and the Mexicans wanted him to, well, because he is bilingual, they expected him to hang with them. And he had Black friends that he knew from the Fillmore and hangin' out in the streets here and he wasn't about to give up his friends, and so he stuck with the Blacks. And of course when you break ranks in prison, Bato can tell you, they don't like that. So the guards had it in for him right away. Then, when he became politicized with George Jackson and W. L. Nolen and Howard Tole and they started turning a criminal mentality into a revolutionary mentality, and fighting racism in the prison, and started trying to unite prisoners of all ethnicities, then Hugo was of great value and an even greater threat because he's bilingual. He could unite, potentially unite Blacks and Mexicans. So, he's been locked up all this time because they really want to break him. And I want to just share one more thing that gives you an insight into Hugo's personality. When Geronimo [Pratt] came out and I interviewed him on Free Radio Berkeley after 27 years [in prison], he talked about Yogi. And he said Yogi could be out on the yard and if some brother that he didn't even know was being assaulted by a guard, Yogi would come to his defense. He would jump in and of course wind up in the Hole himself. I've had letters from Yogi where he would tell me about—he loved W.L. Nolen and he knew Cleveland Edwards and Sweet Jugs Miller, the three who were killed in the yard at Soledad in January 1970 which precipitated the Soledad Brother's case. Yogi was telling me about Cleve and he said W.L. was thrown in the Hole and they were worried about him, so they caught a case by getting beat up themselves and thrown in the Hole so they could go see about W.L. This is the kind of brother we're talking about. We're talking about a brother who is really standup. I mean if he's got your back, your back is covered.

Bato: Yeah, I remember a lot of times when there was a so-called ass-whoopin' to be given out, Hugo usually was the one. And even though we was going to trial, during the San Quentin Six trial, the judge had told the prison guards there at San Quentin to bring us to court no matter what. We decided we were going to protest going to court that morning because of the horrible conditions they had us in, all chained up, they had dog collars on us at the time, and Kiilu, I remember, you had to go into court with 30 pounds of chains.

Yeah. So, we had one of the chains, pretty loathsome, pretty odious that was the chain that went around your neck that was held by the escort, the guy behind you. We thought that was one too many chains for us. So the guards came in and seeing that we were going to protest and the judge in charge of our trial had given them permission to beat us up and stuff, they went in with the whole thing, put on their attack gear, came in with their Billy clubs and they brought gas with 'em that morning, they brought these big old canisters, you know this was gas during the Vietnam time and they brought it into the cell block and it was like, Oh boy! We all got gassed and shot and stuff, but Hugo, they went for him first. I always regretted the fact that if I had not proposed this taking a stand, maybe Hugo, but Hugo just laughed, later, you know, he just laughed about it. He's always been that kind of self-sacrificing kind of person. He's always put himself out there to get hurt first, you know, or to help others, regardless of whether it was going to hurt him or not. But we want to turn and ask comrade Nedzada more of her impressions on her visit talking with Hugo.

Nedzada: Thank you. Well, one of the first things I remember is that he kept asking me about me and you know, I didn't know how to react. Because I went in there and I was like, what am I gonna talk about and you know, I wonder what his life in there is like because when we write letters, you know, he just kind of helps me out with my problems, which is weird because I have all these people out here around me and I can get advice and just talk to people and he can't. And then we went in there and he wanted to talk about me. So what's going on with your little sister, and you know, how you been, and how's work and are you going to school and everything, and I was like, Wow. This man really cares about something other than himself. But, yeah, I just had a very, very—it was a new, new experience in my life. I've never met anybody that was, you know, anywhere close to him.

Bato: Well, I have been into the SHU, allowed just one time, the only time I got to see Hugo. It's been about ten years, you know. I somehow was allowed that one time to go in and visit as an investigator with the California Prison Focus monitoring group that went in and we saw each other briefly. And it was like, five minutes of kinda like us not really believing who we were seeing was really who we were seeing because he kept asking me if I was Bato, and I telling him "Yeah!". But he said he had never seen me in a suit. He said you look like a lawyer. And I go yeah, well, for the purposes of seeing you (Laughter). But also I know what it was to go in there, and it turned my stomach going through the security, through the dungeon, through the bars, hearing the clanging doors, you know, the rattle of keys; it's just unnerving, you know. And for me it was a psychological first to go back into the dungeon-keep that I had left years before.

Kiilu: And I give you high praise, Bato, because I have been dealing with prisoners for over 35 years or something and very, very few will ever go back because of what you're saying. And so for you to overcome that and go anyway, I think you deserve kudos.

Nedzada: I want to say when you spoke about psychological torture, I mean, that's just the most beautiful place [pristine redwood territory] that I've been to, like, it had all these trees, and these little rivers, and our drive up there was so nice, but...

Bato: Crescent City is beautiful, yeah.

Nedzada: And then to think that these people are in there but they can't see any of this stuff, they can't even look outside. It was very hard; it was hard in that sense. And then, you know we talked a little bit about just what it was like in there and he talked about how they separated a lot of the people that were near his cell block so now he really has nobody to talk to. He mentioned that a lot of people in there—I guess that that's one of their tactics—that if they tell you something for long enough you'll end up believing it. And he said they've accused a lot of people of being gang-affiliated, and they started to believe it. They just walk around and they're like, yeah, I'm this big shot and this and that ...

Bato: Yeah, psychological, I think, right.

Nedzada: He said, I refuse to because I was not in a gang. I'm not that, I'm not what they say I am. And it was just, like wow!

Bato: Yeah, Hugo was always been a revolutionary. He's gotten away from the criminal mentality mode, I mean 20, 30 years ago. I mean it's like everybody gets caught up in that, you know, and some people never get out of that criminal mentality mode. But through the teachings of Che Guevara and Ho Chi Min, and Malcolm X and George Jackson, there are prisoners today, I believe tens of thousands of them who are politically conscious. It's a perfect place for the revolutionary spirit to manifest itself, to show itself. But we want to once again turn to ask attorney Gordon Kaupp, what's the next phase for the struggle for Hugo Pinell legal-wise?

Gordon: The next phase is his parole board hearing, which is on July 10th [postponed until November], and I'm going to go up there with Yogi and we're going to present his case before the Board of Prison Terms. And we're going to have to face these cold commissioners who lack humanity and will be evaluating his case. And my job essentially is to take away any excuses that they have to deny him parole. And I do not expect, and he does not expect to walk out of there because one of the things that they hold against him is the fact that he is still housed in the SHU. And so another thing that we have to do after this parole board hearing is get him out of the SHU. And we have to get his case before the courts. And we're going to have to fight that very, very hard. But I want to go back to one thing, Bato, that you said before and that is you were in there, you were part of the San Quentin Six and like you said, Yogi is one of the guys who stood up for everybody and the Department of Corrections has not forgotten that. Although people have changed, the institutional memory has remained. And he stands out in their minds. He told me that the old prison guards, from way back in San Quentin came by on a tour. They got together, drove all the way up to Pelican Bay to see him because the prison guards up there now had said that they had broken his spirit. He said they walked by his cell and he had a big smile for them and "I remember you", and immediately, their smiles turned to frowns. A lot of people have been let out, but he's remained. Because their job, as they see it, is to break him.

Bato: I believe what you're saying is true. It's very, very detestable, but they would come into the Adjustment Center [the hole] to see if any of us

had been broken by the treatment, by the every day—[you're] just a nervous wreck in there with all the commotion and all the noise. It's like an insane asylum. And so Hugo Pinell has put up with that for 42 years and he is still somebody, when you see him, he radiates, you know. He's somebody who ...

Kiilu: He does that.

Bato: He's created his own light in there, you know. He's always had that ability to do that. He generates light. He generates goodness and kindness and absolute strength, you know, the kind of strength that you can only acquire from 42 years within the California prison system. So, Kiilu, we're gonna have to get off the line pretty soon, but do you have anything else that we can read from Hugo, because like I said, he's just a great correspondent, and I wish there would be a booklet put out on his behalf, that would have just some of his really, really courageous and humanitarian letters in them.

Kiilu: Well, here's a paragraph that was written after the last board hearing.

I was denied two more years. Some lady DA from Marin County was present to speak out about the S.Q. 1971 incident, how bad I am, even though we never met, and why I shouldn't be released. It's really blanked up, you know, how the deck is stacked up against Rue and I.

He's talking about Ruchell Magee. Don't forget, Ruchell Magee is always a year ahead of Yogi, so he's been in there 43 years, and of course he's the trophy for the Marin Court House rebellion, the sole survivor of that case. He was Angela Davis' co-defendant.

Bato: Uh, yeah, August 7, 1970.

Kiilu: August 7, 1970. Black August. If I can briefly mention Chip Fitzgerald, the first Black Panther railroaded to Death Row, and fortunately the death penalty was rescinded in 1972, so he got off death row, but he is still doing life. Chip is closing in on 40 years in prison. We have the New York Three who are 30 some years in prison now. Nuh, one of the New York Three, passed away a few years ago, but Herman Bell ... and Jalil Muntaqin [Anthony Bottom] is coming before the board again very shortly,

we should find him on the web site or through the San Francisco Bay View web site, <http://www.sfbayview.com> and find there's a current article about his case, so you should support him and write letters for his release. We've got Leonard Peltier, we've got Marilyn Buck, who just had another board hearing and Assata Shakur in exile. We have so many political prisoners that I can't even name them off the top, Eddie Conway, Mutulu Shakur, Sundiata Acoli ...

Bato: Ramsey Nunez and Alvaro Hernandez, Oscar Fernandez Rivera

Kiilu: Yes, Mumia Abu Jamal—who himself is before the courts now and if he loses this one he's on a fast track to execution. So, we really have our work cut out for us, folks, there are so many prisoners' lives we must save.

Bato: We don't want to forget all of John Africa's people in prison.

Kiilu: Oh yes! the MOVE Nine, absolutely, and one of them died, so there are really, literally eight MOVE members still locked up in prison doing up to 100 years for the death of one police officer killed in friendly fire. Even the judge said, "I don't know who shot the officer." We have a total picture of total injustice in this country. Mumia's obviously framed. Now it's in Congress. They're trying to get France to take away the street they named for Mumia Abu-Jamal in a [French] town, a suburb of Paris. And he's been named an honorary citizen there and the last person named an honorary citizen was Pablo Picasso. So, there you have it. Mumia, our wonderful, brilliant journalist, keeps us posted with his commentaries.

Bato: Thank you very much Kiilu, you know, we're at a quarter of an hour, we're going to have to be fading out here, we want to thank ...

Kiilu: Yeah, thank you so much, Bato, for all your good work with Prison Focus, I'm a regular listener.

Bato: Thank you very much, Kiilu. You put a light in that man's dungeon-keep, let me tell you ...

Kiilu: Well, listen he lit me up too, don't forget! (laughter)

Bato: Well, you stay lit, Kiilu!

Hugo Pinell (also known as Yogi Bear) has been in California prisons since he was 19 years old. He is 61 on March 10, 2007. His original case (an assault charge for which he turned himself in) would have cost the average citizen a few years in prison. Hugo became politicized by revolutionary prisoners such as W.L. Nolen and George Jackson, who promoted revolution amongst prisoners and organized resistance to the racist attacks against them. They wanted fair treatment and opportunity for a good life when they left prison. On August 21, 1971, Jackson was murdered in the yard at San Quentin in an alleged escape attempt. Six prisoners were put on trial for the murders and assaults of three guards and two inmate trustees during the incident. Hugo is the only one of the six who remains in prison. He is now in his 40th year of continuous custody. Thirty-four of those years have been in solitary confinement.

Hugo is kept in the infamous Pelican Bay Security Housing Unit (SHU) in the northwest corner of California near Oregon. The prison is solid gray concrete and the SHU is windowless with only doors for entrance, like a large tomb. It is “hi-tech”, with automatic doors and gates and only artificial light. Even the so-called yard is nothing more than a “dog run” or outdoor closet with 20 foot high walls covered on top with Plexiglas. SHU prisoners are locked down 24/7 except for a possible hour on the “dog run” where they can exercise alone with no equipment whatsoever. They are not permitted any arts and crafts, and only a very limited number of books and property. They are chained hand and foot whenever they leave their cells, escorted by two prison guards. Visits are limited to week-ends and holidays and are less than two hours. Visits are conducted in a “phone booth”. They cannot call outside. In short, Yogi’s mother, who has been visiting him for all these years, has not been able to hug her son in 30 years.

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