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Misery merchants: a creative non-fiction on a private prison in South Africa

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Abstract

I visited Mangaung prison for the first time in 2012, when I was following up on letters that inmates had sent to the Wits Justice Project (WJP), the organisation I worked for. I returned to Mangaung prison many times and interviewed inmates, warders and several other sources. I accessed damning government reports that had been stuffed under the carpet and leaked video footage of abuse.

Mangaung Prison is a Public Private Partnership (PPP). A consortium of five shareholders signed a contract with the government in 2000 to build, run and maintain a private prison.

The evidence I gathered showed the prison's riot team – also known as the 'Ninjas' – taking inmates to either the hospital or the isolation unit, where there are CCTV blind spots. There they would shock them with their electrified shock shields.

Inmates were also being injected against their will with anti-psychotic drugs, often when they had no history of mental illness.

The warders went on several strikes in August and September 2013 and the chaos in the prison escalated to unknown heights. When the prison appointed unqualified staff to replace the absent workers, the state stepped in and took over.

When national and international newspapers ran my investigation, end of October 2013, the then minister of Correctional Services, Sbu Ndebele, promised to 'leave no stone unturned in an investigation that would get to the bottom of the abuse. Currently, more than six years later, the report still hasn't materialised. The prison was handed back to G4S in August 2014.

This manuscript follows several characters who were held in or worked at the prison. L. is a prison gang general and an advocate for prisoners' rights. Dan is a prison guard and a shop steward for the union. Setlai is a Department of Correctional Services official who blew the whistle on the abuse at Mangaung Prison in 2009. Shakes is a member of the Emergency Security Team (EST) also known as the Ninjas.

These and other characters tell the story of how G4S, one of the biggest multinationals in the world, its shareholders in the prison contract and the government colluded together to suppress evidence of abuse and to ensure the continued flow of profits.