

Attack on SC prison guard renews phone-jam debate

September 13 2010, By MEG KINNARD , Associated Press Writer



In this photograph released by the Mississippi Department of Corrections, several hundred cellular telephones confiscated by prison officials at the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, Miss., are displayed, Wednesday, Sept. 8, 2010. Mississippi Corrections Commissioner Chris Epps says the state has a new system to block illegal cell phone use by inmates. Epps said his agency had entered into an arrangement with Global Tel Link and Tecore Networks, which has created the technology that forms a radio frequency umbrella to intercept illegal cellular phone transmissions. (AP Photo/Mississippi Department of Corrections, Kent Crocker)

(AP) -- South Carolina authorities who have helped push for permission to block cell phone signals inside prisons say an officer in charge of keeping out contraband was nearly killed at his home - in an attack planned with a smuggled phone.

Corrections Department Capt. Robert Johnson was getting ready to go to work at Lee Correctional Institution about 50 miles east of Columbia one day last March. Around 5:30 a.m., a man broke down the front door of Johnson's mobile home, shooting the 15-year [prison](#) veteran six times in the chest and stomach.

"I heard a yell, 'Police!'" said Johnson, 57, who believes the intruder may have been impersonating an officer. "I came out the bathroom door, and there was this person there. I really don't remember the rest. From the trauma, my mind just went blank."

Six months into his recovery, Johnson and his bosses want Congress to change a 1934 law that says the [Federal Communications Commission](#) can grant permission to jam the public airwaves only to federal agencies, not state or local ones.

The [cell phone](#) industry says the jamming methods some states want can interfere with emergency communications and legitimate cell phone use in the area. They advocate other, potentially more expensive technology that they say can be more precise but has seen only limited use.

While authorities say Johnson is the first corrections officer in the U.S. harmed by a hit ordered from inmate's cell phone, other people have been targets. In 2005, a New Jersey inmate serving time for shooting at two police officers used a smuggled phone to order a fatal attack on his girlfriend, who had given authorities information leading to his arrest.

Two years later, a drug dealer in Baltimore's city jail used a cell phone to successfully plan the killing of a witness who had identified him as the gunman in a previous killing. And in 2008, a Texas death row inmate used a cell phone to threaten the life of a state senator.

After that attempt, U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison and U.S. Rep. Kevin

Brady, both Texas Republicans, introduced companion bills that would allow states to petition the FCC for permission to jam calls. The Senate passed its version, but the House version has languished, and supporters don't expect it to move forward soon.

"It's something that needs to be done," Johnson said. "It will make the place more safe for the employees that are there and the public."

Jamming opponents say the technology could play havoc with communications between guards and paramedics, not to mention citizens near prisons.

"Signals don't stop and start at defined borders," said John Walls, a spokesman for CTIA-The Wireless Association, which represents cell phone companies.

Walls and others opposed to jamming advocate alternative ways to combat smuggled phones, including something called managed access, which routes all calls coming from a certain area, regardless of carrier, to a third-party provider. That company checks each phone's signature against a database of approved numbers, blocking those that aren't on the list. Such technology works "like a scalpel" instead of simply blocking all calls, Steve Largent, CTIA's chief executive, wrote on his blog Friday.

Authorities activated one such system last month at the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman, and plan to expand it to two other facilities in the state. FCC officials on hand for a demonstration last week pledged to work with other states that want to try it.

"We're desperate, we'll try anything," South Carolina prisons chief Jon Ozmint said.

South Carolina got the FCC's permission in 2008 to conduct a one-time

test of a jamming system at Lieber Correctional Institution, home to the state's death row. Officials flipped a switch on a briefcase-sized device, which emitted a frequency that immediately shut down cell phones around the auditorium, while outside, cell service was uninterrupted. Those results more than satisfied Ozmint.

Maryland has tested similar equipment. Texas called off its own demonstration after state prosecutors advised prison officials the test would violate federal law. The FCC has denied requests from the District of Columbia and Louisiana.

"The next hit's being planned, and waiting for this technology is going to do nothing but cost more lives," Ozmint said.

That March morning, Johnson was dressing and shaving in a bathroom when he heard someone kick in the front door. His wife Mary stirred in the couple's bedroom, hearing a struggle, then her husband's voice.

"He yelled, 'You going to shoot me? You going to shoot me?'" she said. "I stood a minute, and then I actually heard the shots."

The bullets narrowly missed most of Johnson's major organs, though one nicked his liver. He spent months in the hospital, losing 40 pounds he's now struggling to gain back. There have been eight surgeries, with more to come. After hours of daily rehabilitation, Johnson can walk with a cane and dress without help. He's even ready to start learning to drive again.

No arrests have been made in Johnson's case, though state police Chief Reggie Lloyd said investigators are confident that the attacker was acting on directions from an inmate who had a cell phone.

Johnson said he doesn't know if he'll return to work at the prison where

police say the plot on his life was planned.

In three months last year, guards at Johnson's prison confiscated nearly 300 phones - many thrown into the prison exercise yard hidden inside packages and footballs, he said.

"A lot of people are getting hurt unnecessarily," Johnson said. "They're setting up hits and all kind of things from prison, using cell phones. ... Congress has to step up and do the right thing."

More information: FCC's Wireless Telecommunications Bureau:
<http://wireless.fcc.gov>
CTIA-The Wireless Association: <http://www.ctia.org>

©2010 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

Citation: Attack on SC prison guard renews phone-jam debate (2010, September 13) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-09-sc-prison-renews-phone-jam-debate.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
