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N.J. charges 9 with forming a ‘hit squad’ behind bars to attack officers and prisoners

By Blake Nelson

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New Jersey officials have accused a group of prisoners of forming a “hit squad” to attack both officers and others locked up around the state.

One prisoner was beaten so badly last year he suffered a traumatic brain injury, and members of the gang discussed attacking investigators at their homes, authorities said. Another prisoner targeted by the gang was moved to protective custody before he could be hurt.

Nine people have been charged so far, according to a press release.

“Gang violence is always a danger in our state prisons, but we charge that these defendants and their so-called ‘hit squad’ posed a special threat to the safety and security of inmates and correctional police officers,” state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said Thursday in a statement.

The head of the state’s largest corrections union said New Jersey “must continue to be vigilant and take preventive measures” against gang violence.

“Thankfully this one as well as many others ... have been uncovered,” William Sullivan, president of PBA Local 105, wrote in an email.

The only person charged who is not in prison was the group’s leader, Frank Blake, 33, of Hillside, officials said.

He was in charge of the Elizabeth chapter of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation street gang, according to the release.

Officials said Blake directed gang members through phone calls and letters, particularly at Northern State Prison in Newark and New Jersey State Prison in Trenton.

When he was arrested April 22, investigators found multiple guns, an illegally large magazine and what may have been methamphetamine pills in his home, authorities said.

Blake faces a long list of assault, weapons and drug charges, among others, according to court records.

He intends to plead not guilty and denies leading any gang, according to his lawyer, Thomas Ashley. A hearing to determine if Blake should stay in jail is scheduled for next week, Ashley said.

The attorney said he had not yet reviewed any evidence so could not comment on specific allegations.

The other eight people were charged Wednesday, officials said, and the accusations ranged from assault to possessing makeshift blades behind bars.

Two men — Roberto Garcia, 25, of Carteret, and Eduardo Lago, 27, of Newark — attacked another Trenton prisoner Sept. 28 and sent him to the hospital, according to authorities and court records. The pair worked at the direction of Blake and two other prisoners, William Figueroa, 27, of Hightstown, and Andy Reyes, 25, of Somerset.

Another man, Alexander Chludzinski, 27, of Phillipsburg, discussed hurting officers at their homes, officials and a complaint warrant said.

Furthermore, authorities said three others also plotted an attack at Northern State that was ultimately thwarted: Kevin Washington, 32, of Atlantic City, James Zarate, 33, of Randolph, and Larry Cardona, 28, of Elizabeth.

It was not immediately clear if they have lawyers.

The ongoing investigation is led by the prison system's special investigations division and the state attorney general's office. Many of the charges could result in decades-long sentences, said Thomas Eicher, director of the Office of Public Integrity and Accountability.

“We charge that these members of the Latin Kings sought to hold sway in prison through violence and fear as if they were out on the street, but we have stopped their alleged reign of terror,” Eicher said in a statement. “We’re committed to protecting people in custody.”