

DATE: 19 July 2008  
 PUBLICATION: The Straits Times (Page H4)  
 SUBJECT: Spearheading the way in prison control



IN TOP FORM: Officers from the 18-year-old Singapore Prisons Emergency Action Response Force showing off their skills in a demonstration at the Home Team Academy. They use non-lethal force to subdue unruly prisoners. PHOTOS: SINGAPORE PRISONS

# Spearheading the way in prison control

**Elite Prisons unit moves to new Changi complex to help maintain order, where their skills are in more demand in confined environment**

By TEH JOO LIN

THESE elite prison officers are marksmen, but they do not shoot to kill.

The special rounds blasting from the barrels of their launchers shatter upon hitting their targets, namely, troublesome inmates.

No bloodshed – just a good deal of pain. These keepers of order in the prison are members of the Singapore Prisons Emergency Action Response Force, or Spear.

Commander Mark Khng, 36, said of the team's mission in a rare interview: "Our intention is not to kill the inmate if something happens, but to inflict...momentary pain or discomfort so we can...put him under control."

The 18-year-old crack team has taken its use of less-lethal weapons to the new Changi Prison Complex, a more-confined environment that demands such operating tactics.

Its job is to quell prison unrest, take on high-risk operations such as escorting dangerous prisoners and to impart tactical skills such as self-defence moves to other officers.

The majority of prisoners here, though, are well-behaved. Deputy Superintendent Khng, who joined the unit four years ago, cannot recall an instance of the team being called to duty for riots.

Neither can he recall Spear officers having fired a single shot from their launchers or pump-action shotguns – not, at least, in the past four years.

Those shotguns are loaded with "bean bag rounds" – lead shots wrapped in fabric that cripple the target with pain, but do not pierce the flesh.



But the officers have seen some occasional action, such as when fights break out between inmates.

"Sometimes, people can get rowdy for various reasons," said DSP Khng, but added that nothing has been "too violent" so far.

Between April 2006 and last March, 15 assaults took place for every 10,000 inmates.

Of the estimated 12,000 prisoners here, more than 5,000 are now housed in Cluster A of the new Changi Prison Complex, with the rest in other prisons elsewhere.

When completely developed, the complex, comprising a series of high-rise buildings, will house inmates from all 13 prisons in one place.

The Spear unit has moved from its old home opposite Tanah Merah Prison to a new base next to the complex, just a two-minute drive from the prison clusters. A team is also stationed within Cluster A.

The base has a mock prison housing unit so Spear officers can hone their skills.

DSP Khng said that back at the old quarters, his men had trained at a basketball court on which partitions were built to simulate the prison layout.

Tactically, the men have also shifted gear: Where they used to line up in rows to inch forward with big shields towards rowdy prisoners, today's officers work in small, highly mobile teams of two to 12 men.

In a "situation", they aim to "put everything under control in a matter of minutes", he said of his men, who recently took third place overall in a mock prison riot competition in the United States.

Spear is looking to beef up its strength, but only the fittest and ablest prison officers need apply.

Spear officers are held to the standards of the commandos. Every Spear officer must attain at least a silver standard in his physical fitness test; one in three secure golds.

Mentally, they need courage, discipline and integrity. DSP Khng said: "Spear officers are a rare breed. We want people who are suitable for the job. It is not for everyone."

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