

Amid Chaos, Prisoners Strip in Court

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The shadows were lengthening and the autumn sunshine giving way to chill when the crowd of some 500 onlookers across 19th Street from the D.C. jail saw the first sign of a break in the siege.

It was the green prison bus, its windows barred, rolling out the sliding door in the prison parking lot, carrying six prisoners toward U.S. District Court, along with Corrections Director Kenneth Hardy and several newsmen.

The crowd, many of them friends or relatives of those inside the gates, raised a cheer as the bus rolled by. It was 4:15 p.m.

A police motorcycle escort led the way downtown and the bus unloaded its passengers at the John Marshall place entrance to the court.

There the prisoners, flanked by guards, marshals and reporters, and trailing a small army of photographers, television sound technicians and cameramen, made their way through the hall and up the elevators to the sixth-floor courtroom.

They entered the main doors, followed by lawyers,

relatives, legal secretaries and reporters and sat down at one of two tables perpendicular to the judge's bench. Across from them, at the other table, sat their guards.

There was bedlam in the high-ceilinged, windowless courtroom and it was jam-packed with waiting people.

At about 5:15 p.m., after some discussion, the guards and attorneys started to walk the prisoners through a door beside the judge's bench, apparently to search them.

The group stepped halfway into the hall beyond the bench and then returned to the courtroom.

"You want to search us?" said one prisoner. "Search us in the courtroom. Search us in the courtroom," he said again, and proceeded to strip to the skin.

The other prisoners followed suit, as some women in the courtroom averted their eyes and others among the spectators crowded forward to see what was happening.

"This is the way they do it at the jail," said one of the prisoners. "This is the way they do it at the jail. This is the way they do it at the jail. This as a shakedown."

The marshals and guards watched as the prisoners stripped but did not approach them. Then the prisoners put their clothes back on and everybody sat down to wait some more.

As the time dragged on, the original tension faded into boredom, and at 6:30 p.m. Judge Bryant mounted the bench to talk to the prisoners.

Washington Post reporter Ronald Taylor, who was among the black newsmen allowed by inmates to accompany them on the corrections department bus, filed this first person account of the ride:

The prisoners were James Bridgman, Albert McCoy, Robert Jones, Frank Gorhan, and a man called "Slim." On the ride to the courthouse, Gorhan said, "I want to make him (Judge Bryant) see the injustice that they have put upon me."

He said he was convicted on a robbery charge after an 18-month wait in jail. He voiced little optimism about the success of the inmates' action, and said, "I think I'm on a dry ride."

Another inmate, who would only identify himself as "Burger," explained that the inmates were not seeking a trial before Bryant. "We're going to see one of our kind." Both he and Bryant are black.

Hardy maintained a solemn expression throughout the 10-minute ride as report-

ers forming a press pool entered the bus. He shook hands warmly with many of them.

The bus approached the courthouse from the C Street side, the usual prisoner entrance.

"We're going in the front," Burger said. "That's the way human beings go in. They're going to treat us like humans today. Well didn't come here to be tried. We came to talk," he said.

The bus eventually pulled up at the John Marshall place entrance.