

Attica 'Peace Near' When Police Fired

ATTICA (N.Y.) — (UPI) — Rebel inmates were "very near to agreement" — and "some were ready to abandon their demand for amnesty" — when authorities stormed and retook Attica State Prison, a congressional committee was told yesterday.

Five members of the House Select Committee on Crime, headed by Rep. Claude Pepper (D-Fla.) spent most of the day inside the maximum security prison, talking with officials and inmates about the five-day uprising, which claimed 40 lives.

The group left shortly before evening fell.

Pepper said the group had concluded its on-site inspection but would conduct hearings in Washington as part of its investigation into Attica and the nation's prisons.

Other Probes

As Pepper's group departed, two other state investigations were getting under way. A fourth inquiry said it would have no pertinent information during the week-end.

"The inmates indicated they were very near to agreement" when the attack came at mid-morning Monday, Pepper said.

"Some were ready to abandon their demand for amnesty providing we could have a federal marshal in the prison to see to it that there would be no physical retribution."

A special task force appointed to protect the inmates' constitutional rights also made its first visit to the facility and recommended an outside medical team be admitted to conduct its own inspection of the inmates.

Meanwhile five of the state's leading judges met in New York City to form a citizens' "truth seeking" committee which will conduct an investigation of the disturbance but will not make recommendations.

Matter of Opinion

Pepper said it was "a matter of opinion" about whether the attack that broke the uprising should have been staged.

"Those who made the final decision, I am sure, acted in good faith. To the last moment, some inmates doubted whether officials would act forcibly."

Such a decision, the Florida congressman said, was "comparable to when nations have stumbled into war."

About 1000 of the 2200 inmates at Attica took part in the disturbance.

They issued a series of demands and were holding out for two — complete amnesty and removal of Vincent R. Manucci as warden — when the facility was retaken in a fusillade of gunfire and tear gas.

Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, who said his decision to approve the attack was the hardest in his 13 years as governor, said the nine hostages were shot to death in a heavy crossfire as the assault forces converged on the riot area from four directions.

'Unnecessary'

Charles Rangel, a Harlem Congressman, said:

"That much gunfire was not necessary."

He added:

"There is no question in my mind that certain prisoners were selected and segregated and that certain prisoners were beaten after the assault."

Rep. Frank Brasco, also a New York Democrat, said the committee members heard inmates both confirm

and contradict all the stories which have circulated since the riot broke out.

Earlier in the day, Rangel and Brasco said the troopers who retook the prison ignored orders to fire selectively.

'Unbelievable'

"The shooting was all over the place. It was unbelievable," said Rangel, a black.

Brasco, a white from Brooklyn, supported Rangel's story.

"There is no doubt that the orders were that there be selective targets and selective shooting. Emotion led the people involved in the assault," he said.

Pepper added:

"Reports are coming out to officials that inmates who were not going along (with rebel demands) were being attacked by certain members of the inmates. One had as many as 20 stab wounds he received before the assault."

Other officials met in New York City with 18 members of an unofficial observers committee which was involved in negotiations with the rebellious convicts.

Rep. Herman Badillo (R-N.Y.), a member of the committee, said it had unanimously agreed that:

- "It was the condition in the prison which precipitated the rebellion at Attica.

- "Official intransigence was responsible for the bloodshed on Monday morning.

"No individual on the observer committee adopted any position which prevented or hindered a peaceful resolution of the crisis."

It has been charged that one of the negotiators, lawyer William Kunstler, had hindered a peaceful solution by building false hope for total amnesty. Kunstler has denied the charge.
